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THE MAGAZINE OF ROMANTIC FICTION

November 1980

Volume I Number 6

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A Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

If you think about it, every age since the birth of man has had its share of women who broke the mold of the times. In this issue Sarah Comstock, the heroine of Struggle For Paradise, (page 13) did just that. During the 1860's, in Sarah's Quaker community in New England the role of the ideal woman was narrowly defined as that of a dutiful wife.

Sarah's soaring spirit could not bear to be confined to such a limited world. At an early age, she decided that the Quaker religion, which demanded quite strict conformity to its tenets, was at odds with her view of life. Quakers, as Sarah saw them, were joyless.

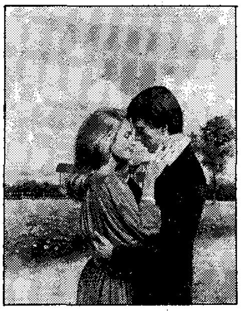
In many ways, Sarah's needs paralleled those of today's liberated women. Because the man she loved was at times incapable of understanding her restless search for self-fulfillment, Sarah's struggle was often heartbreaking but she found that the freedom to be herself was too precious to give up. Eva Rawlinson, the contemporary heroine of The Misfit (page 24) also struggled against social pressures to pursue her own individual goals and eventually found happiness where other, less independent women might have failed.

Love is never far away from these women because they have learned to love themselves and they have followed their own hearts. Perhaps this is the lesson of these stories: that the courage to follow your own heart brings the only true happiness, satisfaction and love—and that is too precious to give up.

Happy Reading,

Manon Tingue

Manon Tingue
Editor



Cover Illustration by
Franco Accornero

Anna Compton and Simon Herington in a tender moment on the grounds of Simon's magnificent country estate. From the novel . . . *The Winter Prince*

CAMEO

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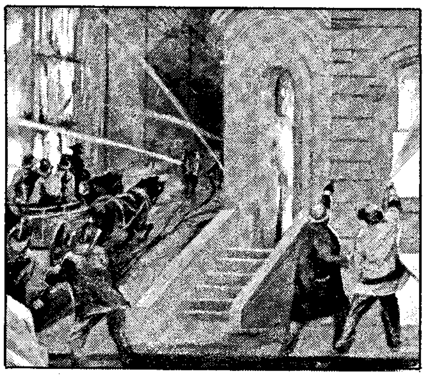

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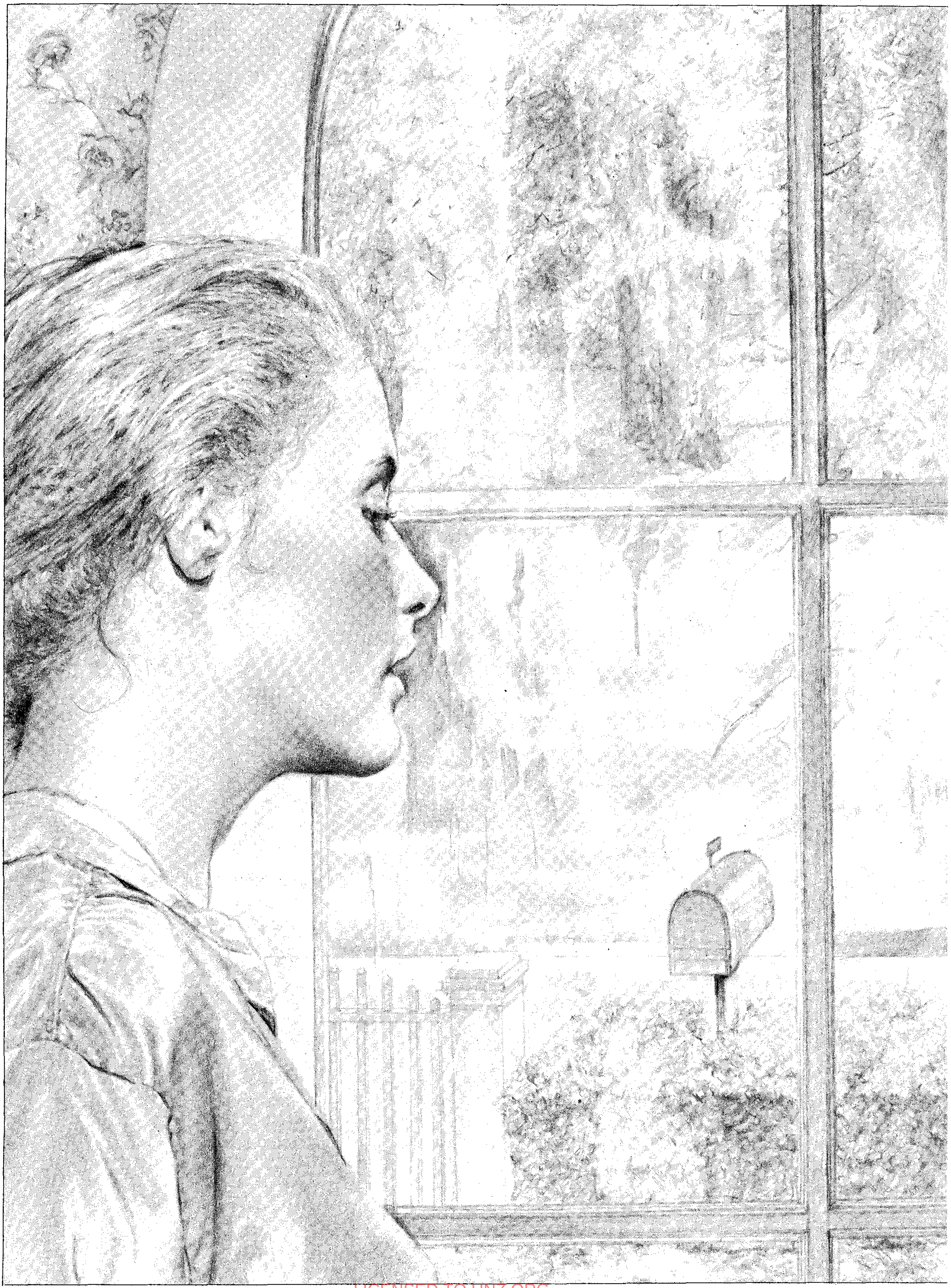

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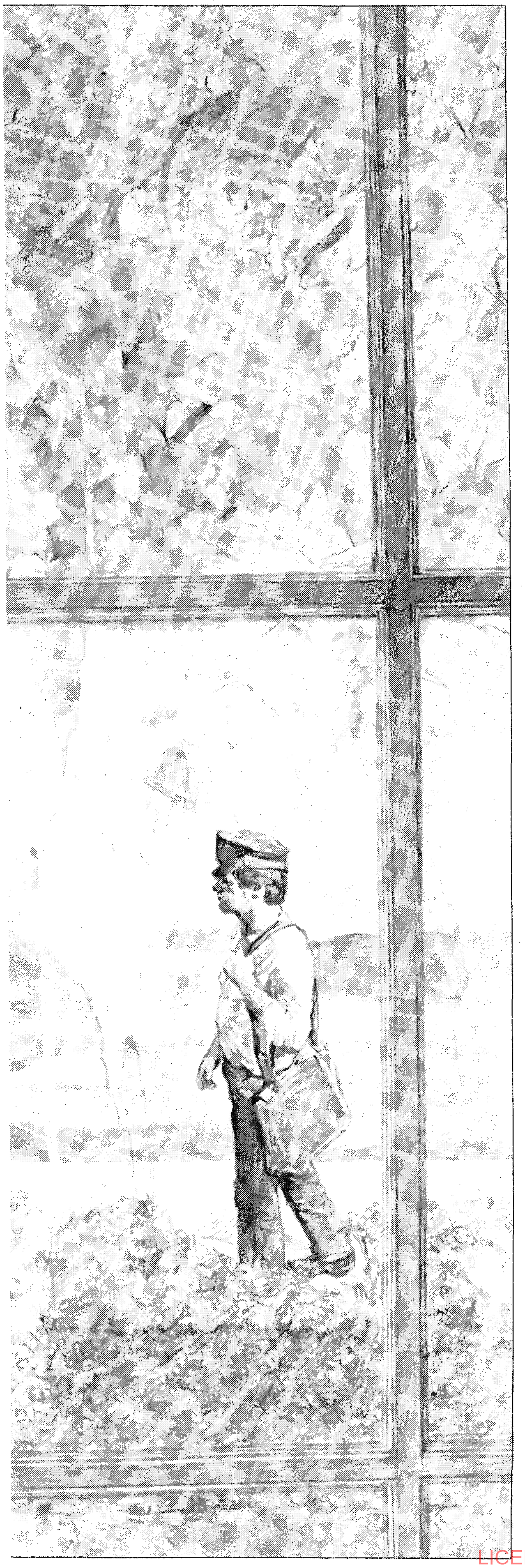


Yesterday was Summer

Lisa was as wildly in love with him as he was with her. Why did her mother insist on keeping them apart?

The rain slid like tears down the windowpane; in the streaming world beyond the window the dead leaves of autumn lay piled in sodden heaps in the gutters. Would it never stop raining? Lisa looked out into the dreary garden and remembered despondently the green and golden summer.

A movement beyond the garden hedge caught her eye and she leaned closer to the window, her heart suddenly pounding uncomfortably.

The mailman—was it? She couldn't see properly through the curtain of rain. Yes, it was. She turned from the window; perhaps if she didn't watch there would be a letter this time—she strained her ears, listening for the squeal of the rusty hinges of the gate. Nothing. When she turned back the mailman was gone, turning in to the house next door.

Downstairs her mother was moving around in the kitchen, and the smells of Saturday breakfast wafted through the house; she could hear the buzz of her father's electric razor.

From the chair next to the bed, Sarah, the big rag doll, friend and comforter since childhood, grinned her crooked and sympathetic grin. Lisa, blinking, picked her up and hugged her hard. Wouldn't you think he'd write? Just a friendly line would do. He had promised he would.

Almost three weeks since he had left, and for all she knew he might have stepped off the edge of the earth. No matter how hard she tried, dredging her memory for things he had told her during those long sun-filled days of summer, she just could not imagine the world he now lived in. She had only the haziest idea of what a university might be like; had a crazy and childish im-

A short story by Terry Crane

pression of something halfway between school and a permanent, wild all-night party. It was his world, and so far removed from hers that he might have been on the moon. She imagined him talking, using his long-fingered hands as he always did to emphasize a point, among a group of strangers. Strangers to her but not to him.

The university must be full of people smarter and more interesting than Lisa Mathews. Full, too, of girls whose mothers were not around to insist on their getting in by twelve, to fuss about where they were going and what they were going to do when they got there, to wait up for them and—Lisa winced—offer coffee at the most inconvenient moments. They had laughed about it at the time; exploded with laughter, holding onto one another for support. They had been standing under the tree by the garden gate, the night sweet-smelling and warm about them, the moonlight flooding the lawn beyond the shadows where they stood, when the back door had opened and Mrs. Mathews had appeared.

"Lisa? Chris? There's coffee made if you'd like to come in and get it."

"Don't knock it," Chris had said, laughing at her exasperation. "There are many girls who would give their eye teeth to have parents who really cared about them."

That was just like him, to say the right thing. But he couldn't have meant it. Who wanted to leave a party just as it was beginning to warm up? Or have to argue for hours to get permission to stay out later every once in a while? Why, oh why did her mother fuss so? A dozen small, almost forgotten incidents stirred in her memory, and she squirmed with embarrassment. Poor Chris—he'd probably been only too pleased to get away, back to the free and easy life. No wonder he hadn't written.

Her father's head appeared around the door. "Come on, love, breakfast. Didn't you hear Mom call?" His kindly eyes took in his daughter's set and miserable face, the tightly clutched floppy doll, but wisely he said nothing more.

Carefully casual, Lisa tossed Sarah facedown on the bed. "I'm coming."

She pushed bacon around on her plate, refused a slice of toast, drank half a cup of tea. Outside the wind blew in boisterous, rain-filled gusts. There wouldn't be another mail delivery now until Monday morning. The weekend stretched ahead of her, empty.

As if sensing her thoughts, her mother asked, "Any plans for this weekend, Lisa?"

"No." She hadn't intended to sound that short. She intercepted the look which passed between her parents.

"But I thought—well, isn't Maureen having a party tonight? I met her mother on the street the other day. She particularly mentioned that you'd been invited—"

"That's right." For the life of her Lisa could not keep the irritation from her voice. "But I'm not going."

"Why ever not?"

"For heaven's sake!" It was almost a relief to lose her temper—she slammed her chair back from the table. "Because I don't want to go, that's why. I can't do a thing right in this house, can I? You nag me if I go out and you nag me if I don't—"

"Lisa!"

She ignored the hurt look on her mother's face. "I've a life of my own now, Mom, or at least I should have. You can't organize me and fuss over me as you did when I was little. You *have* to leave me alone. I'll go out when I want to go out." And come back when I want to come back, she longed to say, but didn't quite dare.

"That'll do now." Her father put down his tea cup. Though his eyes were sympathetic, his voice was firm. "We know you've been under a bit of a strain lately, missing young Chris and all. But it isn't the end of the world, you know, for all that you might think it is. And it certainly doesn't give you the right to talk to your mother like that. She worries about you. We both do. We only want you to be happy."

Sudden tears stung Lisa's eyes, tears for a time when her father could take her on his knee and kiss away the bruises and scratches of childhood. "I know. I'm sorry. But, honest, Dad—" She could say no more.

There was a moment's awkward silence. Her mother stirred her tea and the spoon rattled loudly against the cup. Lisa pushed her plate away.

"I wondered," said her mother at last, her voice a little quieter than usual, "if you'd like to come out with us for the day, down to Gran's? We could be there easily before lunch, and it would make a change for us all, a day in the country."

"In this?" Lisa's father looked doubtfully toward the window.

Brisker now, Mrs. Mathews stood up and began to collect the plates together. "The weather forecast says that it will clear by this afternoon." She was looking at Lisa. "What do you think?"

Lisa, making the effort, smiled. "Okay." It wasn't such a bad idea at that. It seemed a long time since she'd seen her lovely Gran, or visited the warm and welcoming little house. "I'd like to."

"That's settled then. I'll give her a call, tell her we're coming." Her mother disappeared into the hall; when she came back she was smiling. "She was delighted. I said we would be there for lunch, so we'd better get started. She's really looking forward to seeing Lisa."

The sun came out while they were having tea. Funny, mused Lisa later, standing at the door of Gran's tiny kitchen, that a country garden doesn't look nearly so sad in the autumn as a town garden. And the smell! She breathed deeply, wet leaves and the sweetness of late flowers. Behind her she could hear the clatter of crockery and the murmur of voices as Mom and Gran washed the dishes.

"I think I'll go for a walk. Won't be long."

The ground was muddy, the path overgrown. Her jeans were soon soaked from the knees down, and the bottoms flapped wetly around her shoes. But the air was soft and clear after the rain, the countryside brown and gold and peaceful.

She walked as far as the huge old oak, smiled to herself when she remembered that as a little girl she had believed that tree fairies lived in the squirrel hole halfway up the trunk. She rested for a while on a gnarled and twisted root, watching through branches whose dark leaves still clung tenaciously to them while clouds raced across the sky. It was getting late. She really should go back.

It had been a good idea though, this trip. For some odd reason, she did feel much better.

When she walked back into the cottage, her parents and Gran were in the sitting room talking. Gran smiled and her eyes twinkled. "Well, here's the girl herself. Let's see what she thinks."

"What about?" Lisa perched herself on the arm of the chair.

"Staying here with me for a couple of days. Mary says you have some vacation coming and can take it when you like. Why not take Monday and Tuesday off?"

"I'll come down on Tuesday afternoon to pick you up. Gran would love to have you, and I'm sure the change would do you good." Her mother was watching her anxiously.

"But I haven't brought anything with me—well, not enough for three days—" The mailman might come on Monday morning, and wouldn't she be putting Gran to a lot of trouble? Sheets and things. Supposing a letter came and she was not there? She smiled at Gran. "You've no idea how much I eat." But there had been no letter last week, nor the week before.

"Nonsense. I'm not so ancient that I can't remember your mother at your age. You'd be no trouble at all. I would really like you to stay. It would make a lovely change to have some company. It's only a couple of days—the world will still be there for you to go back to on Tuesday." Gran's face was soft-skinned as a child's, her hair snow white and a little untidy, her blue eyes still sharp and clear. "Do an old lady a favor, child. Stay till Tuesday."

In the garden a bird suddenly began to sing, piercingly sweet and clear.

"All right. If you're really sure that it isn't too much trouble, I'd love to. Will you call them at the office, Mom? Tell them I'll be back on Wednesday."

Her mother smiled. "I'll tell them."

It was Monday evening before she mentioned Chris to Gran. Until then she had made a determined and at least partly successful effort not to think about him. It was easier here, in surroundings that had no connection with him, no memories. On Sunday she painted the garden shed, sloshing the green paint on good and thick, enthusiastically encouraged by Gran, who had been intending to do it herself all summer. On Monday the blustering wind rose again, but the sun still shone from a brilliant sky and they laughed as they strolled down the lane to the village, the crackling gold and red leaves swirling and flying in the wind.

They sat talking for a long time that evening after supper while the early nighttime shadows gathered beyond the windows and the firelight flickered and gleamed around the tiny, spotless room. Gran talked of the past, of her own girlhood, of the heartbreak and happiness of being nineteen and in love.

"None of us will ever believe that anyone else has suffered as we have. Her smile twinkled in the gloom. "You know, looking back, I think that I actually used to *enjoy* being miserable sometimes."

Lisa looked at her soft, still-pretty face. "I'll bet you had lots of boyfriends!"

"Oh, I had my share. I was a flighty thing at your age, until I met Jeff. And they were strange times, the thirties—so much unrest, so much fear, and war coming closer and closer." A different tone had entered her voice. Lisa's eyes flickered to the sideboard where she knew stood the picture, faded now, of the young pilot who had been her grandfather. She had always found it very strange to think of a man so young—not much older than she was now herself—as a grandfather. For like so many of his comrades he had not lived to become old; had not indeed even lived to see his daughter. Before Lisa's mother had been born, he had died in the skies above Sussex.

"Weren't you ever . . . didn't you ever think of marrying again?"

There was a brief silence.

"I thought of it." Gran began to gather up the supper dishes. "I had a couple of offers." Lisa sensed the smile in her voice. "But, well, there was Mary. She was so like Jeff, and he and I had had so little time together. When it came to it, I suppose I could never bear the thought of another father for her. Silly, but there it is. Would you bring the plates, dear? I can't quite manage them."

Later, with the table cleared and the lamps splashing little pools of light across the cozy room, Lisa found herself talking about Chris and about her own difficulties with her mother. Gran sat quietly knitting, the click of the needles sounding above the crackle of the fire.

"And you can't blame him, Gran," Lisa was surprised at her own vehemence. "It must have been a positive relief for him to get away. If only Mom would understand that I'm grown-up now; she makes me feel so stupid, fussing in front of my friends. Chris isn't the first one she's frightened off, he's just the most important. 'Where are you going? Who's going to be there? When will you be back? Don't bother to take a key, I'll wait up.' Oh, she treats me as if I'm Red Riding Hood in a forest positively *packed* with wolves. And the awful thing is that I know it's because she loves me. I just can't seem to get through to her, make her see

YOU ARE

by Jacqueline Hamshyer

You are . . .
the answer to my wordless plea
the eyes that make me see
the thundering voice of wisdom
the core of my own kingdom
For you are the most vital part of me.

You are . . .
the fire of my night
the flame of wild delight
the passion coursing through my veins
the agonizing pains
the misery behind my tears
the cause of all my fears
For you are the fever burning in my blood.

You are . . .
fantasy and reality
madness and sanity
fortitude and dismay
yesterday and today
For you are my alpha and my omega.

You are . . .
my very essence, my reason for being
for living, for loving
for crying, for caring
for sharing, for shining
for giving, for growing
for hurting, for healing
for undertaking, for understanding
for knowing that—

Of my universe, you are the pillar.
Of my past, present and future,
eternal prisoner.

what she's doing." Her grandmother, knitting furiously, did not look up. "I'll bet you didn't treat her like that." Lisa knew that she sounded like a sulky child and could do nothing about it.

Gran put down her knitting, lifted her head. "No, Lisa," she said gently. "I didn't treat Mary quite like that. Because I didn't need to. Wait—" Lisa, stung, had opened her mouth to protest. "That doesn't mean for a moment that I'm saying she needs to treat you like that. I'm simply saying that things were . . . different for your mother."

"Well, I know that. That's just what Mom doesn't seem to understand—that things are different *now!*"

Gran shook her head. "Not quite what I meant." She stood up, walked to the sideboard. When she came back to the chair she was carrying the photograph. The young pilot laughed into the camera, his hat at a jaunty angle, his uniform looking oddly out of place in the peaceful Sussex countryside which lay behind him. Gran sat down; her fingers were tight around the frame.

"There is something that I think you should know, my dear. Perhaps your mother won't be very pleased with me for telling you, but it's long enough ago now not to hurt anyone, and it might help you to understand." She looked into the framed, laughing face for a moment, then very gently stood the photograph on the table next to her. "At supper you asked me if I had ever thought of marrying again. I was not quite honest in my answer. The truth is that I have never been married."

It took a moment to sink in. Lisa's eyes moved to the photograph.

Gran sighed. "It's hard to explain what things were like then, during the war. The uncertainty. We never knew what the next moment might bring. Now, this second, was all that was certain, all that we could truly count as ours. I sometimes think that your generation probably finds that easier to understand than your mother's did."

She paused, and the fire spat into the grate. "I don't think that Mary really ever forgave me, although I don't believe that she realizes it herself. It was very hard for her, growing up in a world where illegitimacy was considered shameful, a disgrace. She was always afraid that people would discover the truth. Attitudes were so different then; it was almost the worst thing you could do to have a fatherless child and to keep her, to refuse to give her away, to love her and to bring her up alone. My own family was against me. Mary and I moved here, and most people assumed that Jeff and I had been married, that I was just another young war widow. But some people knew, and that was enough. My own mother told Mary when she was eight. Mary came to me and asked what a bastard was." Her voice was quite expressionless. "And I had to tell her."

"But that's terrible." Hard to think of her mother, a fatherless little girl, learning the bitter truth with no one to turn to.

"Well, at any rate, you see what I mean when I say that I had no need to be strict with Mary when she grew up. I honestly don't think she allowed your father to hold her hand until the ring was on her finger. And perhaps, too, under the circumstances, you might now understand her concern for you?"

Lisa nodded. She got up, walked to the table, picked up the photograph. He was very handsome; the same dark hair and clear pale skin as her mother's.

"He looks very nice. You were . . . going to—?" She stopped, embarrassed.

"On his next leave." Gran smiled. "Don't look so sad, child. It was all so long ago, and if I had it all to do again I would, in spite of everything. There aren't many who can say the same. I wouldn't have missed one moment of the time we had together. There are even compensations, if you look for them." Lisa looked at Gran questioningly. "I have only the memories of him as he was then, handsome, and gay, and brave. And he never saw me old." She touched her softly wrinkled cheek.

Lisa bent impulsively and kissed her. "You're beautiful. You know you are. And he would have known it, too. Thanks, Gran."

She took longer than usual to go to sleep that night.

Lisa's mother arrived at two the following afternoon and was obviously delighted, if a little surprised, at her daughter's enthusiastic welcome.

"Hold on a minute," she disentangled herself and reached for her handbag. She was smiling widely. "I've got something here for you; it came this morning."

Chris's writing. She'd recognize it anywhere. Speechless, she took it. "I'll read it outside."

She read it once, much too fast, missing half of it but none of the important parts, then again much more slowly, savoring every word. He was sorry he hadn't written. There had been so much to do. There had been a mix-up about his rooms. He'd had to look for somewhere new, had had trouble finding anywhere decent, had been sleeping on a friend's floor. He'd meant to write but hadn't wanted to do it hurriedly—what he had to say was too important to be scribbled in an apartment full of noisy and nosey undergraduates. Lisa read the next paragraph three times in succession. She smiled. He sent his love to her mother.

She wandered back into the kitchen, the letter crackling in her hand. Gran and Mom had been talking earnestly and were standing very close to one another. They both watched her as she came through the door.

"He wants me to go down there for a weekend, to meet his friends, see the university. He says—" she smiled, "he says he wants to show me off. Oh, Mom—?"

She saw Gran's hand touch her mother's arm, lightly.

"Well, of course you must go. You'll have a marvelous time." Her mother reached for the car keys. "Perhaps Dad and I will take the opportunity to go off on our own for the weekend. It's been years since we could do that. He's got good taste, that Chris of yours. I'll grant him that. You'll have to bring him down here, introduce him to Gran. They'll get on like a house on fire, I'm sure. Now, come on, love, or Dad'll start to worry, you know how he is . . . "

Betwixt the Princess and the Witch

How could a stone-hearted Minister handle a lass with the wild spirit of the Scottish highlands in her blood?

Once upon a time there was a princess, a prince charming, a witch and a brash, muddling brownie who all came together in the Kirk at Stoniebrae—and for two of them, nothing was ever to be the same again.

Stoniebrae was named after the great hill of rock at one end of High Street. The other end sloped to the wooded banks of Langbrook. It was more a winding lane than true street, wide enough for two pony carts to pass. The village seemed small from the top of the Brae, all chimney pots and thatched roofs save for the great house which belonged to Laird Campbell. But to the natives the village was the bonniest spot in Scotland.

Laird Campbell had one child, Glynis, the apple of his eye. She was born with hair of spun gold and skin of alabaster. If anyone ever looked the part of a princess and knew how to play it, it was Glynis Campbell.

Down the hill in a miner's cottage lived Gordon Stuart, his old mother and his daughter, Margaret. That bairn was a raven-haired, green-eyed lass with a saucy face and the wildness of the highland clans in her blood. Even before she walked she could melt hearts to suit her fancy. Ay, there was a budding witch.

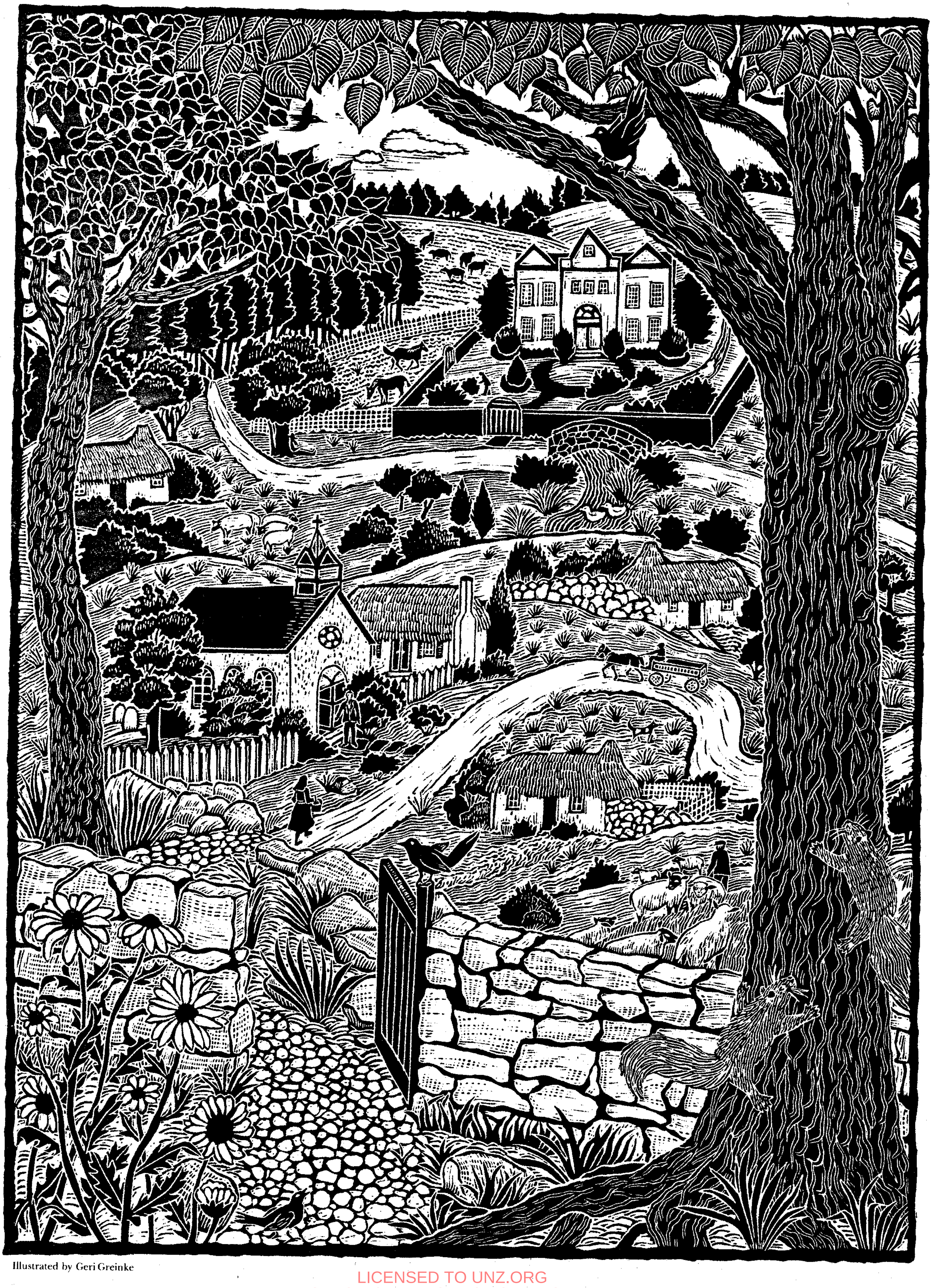
A short story by Shirley Stewart

The children of Stoniebrae knew it. On long summer days they wandered on the moors and in the glens. They knew where the dark green circles of grass—the fairy rings—were, and they believed in all the magic that ever was. Glynis was princess in their make-believe and Margaret was witch. It came naturally to each.

Angus McHaggerty was not Prince Charming, nor did he care to be. He chased the girls with toads and spiders—until he was older; then he chased them for a kiss. Since he had black curling hair and melting brown eyes, the girls did not run very quickly. Except Margaret. She knew that the kiss a lad cannot get is the one he hankers after.

When the three of them were twenty, Prince Charming himself came to Stoniebrae. Glynis was a true lady . . . she had been to school in Edinburgh and spoke properly, dressed beautifully and smiled charmingly, but gone were the days when she played with the miners' children.

Margaret had Angus McHaggerty plus most of the village lads dancing at attention whenever she chose to weave her spell. The old wives grumbled. "That one. She cares for no one but herself!" But their men replied, "Dinna' lass?"



Illustrated by Geri Greinke

One thing Margaret did care about was music. Since there was only Laird Campbell's piano and the kirk organ, she became kirk organist for old Reverend McQuown. When that good man died she, along with the rest of the village, mourned him as one of her own family.

Soon after, Gordon Stuart brought home the news from the colliery that the new minister was young, a bachelor, and that Mrs. McQuown was staying on at the manse as his housekeeper. His name was James McHugh.

Margaret was at the organ on the new minister's first Sabbath morning at Stoniebrae when some daft, improper brownie stuck his wee foot out and she fell over it into as helpless a state of enchantment as ever she had brewed. At the moment, it happened her mind was on Angus, who sat in the second pew and winked at her most distractingly.

The side door opened and every head turned discreetly toward it. In strode such a braw man Margaret could not stop staring at him. He looked all of Prince Charming, with a strong, manly face, eyes as blue as Prince Charlie's and a tall, straight figure which would attract any lass's eye. She heard not a word of his sermon, but for years afterwards, she could close her eyes and still see his hands gripping the pulpit, his brown hair falling down over his forehead just as it did that day.

He did not look her way until he was through preaching and she had started to play the psalter. Then he appeared struck by what he saw. Was love at first sight felling him the same as it was felling her, Margaret wondered?

Never was a clever lass further from the truth. After the service Mrs. McQuown took Margaret's hand and led her up to James McHugh.

"Ah, the organist," he said gravely. "I should like a word with you." He strode down the aisle to the organ. Margaret followed, curious. "Now, Miss Stuart," he said severely, "this is the proper tempo. The speed at which you were going was uncommonly fast for the church service." He played *Wigtown* with dignity and marked slowness.

"Yes, Reverend McHugh," Margaret answered meekly. How could she explain that she had been so affected at the very sight of him she could scarce keep her fingers from dancing on the keys?

"Also,"—all of a sudden he looked young and embarrassed—"I must insist you not use paint on your cheeks in the kirk."

Her eyes were green fire. "I have never used paint in my life!"

"That is your natural coloring?"

"Ay."

"Remarkable." He stared at her disconcertingly as if waiting for her to admit deceit. Then without a word of apology he continued. "You may practice afternoons. I'll not be using the study then. Mrs. McQuown will give you the psalter numbers on Thursday. Good day, Miss Stuart."

What a hateful man. Painted cheeks indeed!

That afternoon, Angus came by with a buggy and a pair of bays. "Maggie," he cooed into her ear as they rode through the countryside, "I have asked you twenty-three times . . ."

"Twenty-four."

"Anyway," he cocked his head confidently, "this time I'm expecting to hear you say ay. Uncle Tom in Edinburgh wants me to work for him as a joiner. Tom won't live forever. There'll be a tidy business there some day. How would you like to live in the city?"

This was news indeed, and the day before it might have tempted her. But before her mind's eye rose the image of James McHugh. Before she was through with that one, he would bow the knee to her. What a giant satisfaction it would be to turn him down! No man could speak to her as he had and get away with it.

"I will think about it," she told Angus with a disarming smile.

Thursday afternoon Margaret put on a well-fitting red tartan and brushed her hair until it shone. She stood by the front window until she saw the minister walking home from his calls. Then she darted out the door and up the street to the manse. Try as she would to stay calm, she was aquiver with excitement. She cared too much how this affair came out. That was not good for scheming.

Mrs. McQuown answered the door. "Oh, Margaret," she whispered, "thank goodness it is only you. Nearly every lass in Stoniebrae has been to call. It's kind of them to take such an interest, but most trying for Reverend McHugh to have so much company about."

"I came to get the psalter numbers." Margaret spoke loud enough for him to hear.

"Ah, yes. They're here on the hall table. Now dear, you come a wee bit earlier next week, before he gets home, and we'll have a cup of tea and a lovely chat."

Margaret paused on the doorstep, trying to prolong the visit. "Have the Campbells been to call?"

"Only Glynis. I was surprised. She came Tuesday with a pound cake. Then if she didn't forget her gloves and have to return for them yesterday! I'm fair dizzy with so much attention."

Margaret walked home thinking furiously. If she could not bake a better cake than Glynis Campbell she would jump in Loch Lomond. Glynis should not have that rude young man before *she* was good and through with him!

Sunday morning after the service Margaret walked up to James McHugh. "Was the tempo more to your liking?" she asked meekly.

"Ay, good," he said shortly. That was all.

Margaret marched home, her cheeks as flushed as paint from anger. He had dismissed her as he might a stray cat! There must be *some* way to charm the man.

Her father was near as upset as she with the new minister. "Regular fire and brimstone, he is," Gordon Stuart said darkly. "The man would find John Knox a wee bit on the liberal side. I can't sit down and enjoy a comforting dram with a clear conscience after listening to him. Reverend McQuown didn't see our pleasures as being so wicked."

"Now, Gordie," Granny spoke up, "give him time. The young must need be too good for fear of not being good enough. He'll mellow. Besides," her eyes twinkled at Margaret, "he gives the lasses someone bonnie to look at."

"Ha!" Gordon Stuart exclaimed, pouring himself a comforting dram and brooding over it. and "Ha!" Margaret sniffed, flouncing off to her room and pulling a drawer right out of her chest, she tugged so fiercely at it.

Margaret decided on further thought that a dour man like James McHugh might like some plainer fare after all the cakes that had been brought to the manse of late, so the following Thursday she took a basket of fresh-baked scones with her. Mrs. McQuown was delighted with them. "'Tis early for tea, but I do fancy one. Sit down, Margaret, and I'll see if Reverend McHugh won't join us."

He followed her back into the room a moment later, his blue eyes saying nothing. "Good day, Miss Stuart."

"Oh now, she is Margaret—or Maggie to everyone hereabouts," Mrs. McQuown corrected.

"Margaret then," he said rather stiffly.

They did not have to implore him to have a second scone, nor a third. And he had called her Margaret. It was time well spent. When he reached for his Bible and coat, she jumped up. "I'll go with you as far as our cottage," she said.

"Thank you, I am going the other way," he said politely but firmly. "Miss Campbell is recovering from the grippe and has asked me to call. Good day, Miss Stuart—Margaret."

She watched him leave, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. The grippe, was it? Why hadn't she thought of that?

Mrs. McGruder, the village gossip, had been to visit Granny. Granny told them the news at supper. "Mrs. McGruder says the new minister is more than a mite interested in Glynis Campbell!"

"'Twould make a good match," Gordon said. "A wife is what that stiff-necked young fellow needs—and a houseful of bairns. A taste of Campbell money might soften him too."

"He's not the man to take Campbell money," Margaret snapped. "And Glynis is not likely to live on a minister's pay."

"There is sense in that," her father said, "but ye needna' bite my head off, lass." He drew deeply on his pipe. "Angus had a talk with me today. He's thinking of going to Edinburgh."

"He mentioned it."

"You could do worse than Angus, child. He's got spirit to him, like yourself. It doesn't pay to marry with one too different."

"Nor one you do not love," Margaret answered back.

"Ay, love. That upsets the apple cart."

The next day, as Margaret practiced at the kirk, in came James McHugh himself. "I'm after a book from the study," he explained as she looked up from her music.

"Ay." Her fingers were suddenly unsteady on the keys, so taken by surprise she was.

But instead of going to his study, he came and leaned on the organ. His eyes were troubled. "I have been here some weeks now," he said.

"Ay," she said faintly. His closeness had a remarkable weakening effect on her.

"But I am no closer to folks than when I came."

It was her chance to hurt him with the truth and she took it. "Some do say you are not a comforting minister like Reverend McQuown."

His eyes flashed. "A comforting minister. Is that all they want?"

"I should not have told you."

"No, you are right to speak the truth. I am not angry with you."

"Nor should you be angry with them. They are God-fearing folk. But they enjoy a dram. When a man spends most of his waking hours in the mines, he needs some pleasure. I don't expect you've been in the mines."

"No, I have not," he admitted, looking at her thoughtfully. "Do you think I am too severe?"

"A mite."

To her amazement he laughed, and for a moment he looked a winsome lad indeed. "You are truthful, Margaret," he said. "If you are through, I'll walk you home."

She did not remind him of the book he had come after. She could hardly believe things were suddenly going well. Was he to be won by simple honesty then?

As they walked along High Street, Mrs. McGruder came out of the greengrocer's. James grasped Margaret's arm. "We'll cross to the other side," he said. "I cannot bear that woman."

"Ay, she could make gossip out of a man holding his wife's hand. But don't be too hard on her. Her father and husband were both killed in the same mine disaster, and a year later her only son died of pneumonia. Granny says 'twas enough to make any woman daft."

"I did not know of her misfortunes," he said humbly. "Margaret, you are a kind lass as well as an honest one."

Little did he know that she had just been hoping that Glynis Campbell was looking down on them from the great house on the hill, and her thoughts had not been kind at all.

"Tomorrow I shall visit the mines," James McHugh promised.

The next Thursday he brought the psalter numbers to Margaret and stayed to have tea with her and Granny. He was sobered by his visit to the mines. He asked about various families of the town, and the talk happened upon the name of McHaggerty. "Ah, that Angus," Granny winked. "He would marry our Margaret and take her off to Edinburgh."

"Oh, Granny," Margaret objected, "I would not marry Angus. I don't love him."

James McHugh looked at her in a way which sent shivers up and down her back, but he said nothing.

Later Margaret was weeding the front garden, humming to herself, when Mrs. McGruder came through the gate. "Well, Margaret, have ye heard about the party at the Campbells?" she asked.

"No."

"'Tis a birthday for Glynis. She's ordered a pale blue satin dress. She'll look like a princess in it. There'll be folks from Edinburgh. And of course Reverend McHugh."

Margaret's humming stopped.

"I expect there'll be wedding bells for those two soon."

Margaret's heart ached within her. She no longer wanted to drop a discarded James at Glynis's feet. She wanted him for her own.

The evening of the party Margaret walked alone down to Langbrook and sat on a tree stump. In the gloaming she could see the Laird's house ablaze with lights. She fancied she could see Glynis and James walking through the Laird's roses. Glynis would capture him easily with her charming city manners and her sweet smiles. And why not? It was a much more suitable match for him than a poor miner's daughter. For the first time, Margaret wept over a man.

She was in a wretched state indeed next morning, and her father, understanding nothing, told her at breakfast that she deserved to have her ears boxed for the way she was dangling Angus McHaggerty. "He'll be off to Edinburgh without ye, and then where will ye be?"

Margaret cried again. She brooded the whole morning about her bleak future. She would grow old with no man nor bairns to care for, and finally she would be as nosy as Mrs. McGruder, living other people's lives with none of her own.

The air was hot and heavy that afternoon when she arrived at the kirk. While she was practicing at the organ, a great wind came up, tossing the trees to and fro. Lightning flashed and thunder crashed. There was nothing to do but stay put until the storm was over.

In the dimness of the kirk, with the

(Continued on page 60)

STRUGGLE FOR PARADISE

Illustrated by Stephanie Parker

BY JUDI BREAULT

A
CAMEO
NOVEL

STRUGGLE FOR PARADISE

Quaker, faker. Afraid to go to war.
Broad hats, 'fraidy cats. We don't want no more.

The words jolted Sarah Comstock, hitting with the force of a physical slap. Her father and her sister sitting beside her in the wagon placidly ignored the taunt and the three boys standing in their path, but Sarah's face burned. The boys chanted louder as wagons crawled to a halt and people slowed their pace to watch. Sarah found herself looking helplessly into the hostile faces around her. Suddenly an older man stopped and grabbed a handful of stones from the roadway.

"You coward," he yelled, throwing them at their horse. "My son lost a leg at Bull Run while you sit there so righteous, your pocketbook growing fat."

Francis Comstock didn't avert his eyes from the road ahead. With a straight back, his grip firm on the reins, he brought the frightened horse under control and swerved around the boys in front of him.

Sarah fumed in silence, rebellious thoughts racing through her mind. She wanted to stand and shake an angry fist at the fast-receding crowd, not drive away meekly, like a coward. She closed her eyes to try and subdue her anger and leaned against the backboard, thinking about Quakers and cowardice.

"Thee is quiet, Sarah," Francis said softly as the buggy approached the long hill leading to Benefit Street and their mother's family.

"Fa," Sarah began, reverting to her nickname for Francis from earlier years, "I don't understand what happened."

"Quakers are different. We dress, speak, and worship as in times past. We're not worldly. We do not smoke, drink harmful things, or fight any man's or nation's battles. They call us peculiar people." Francis sighed resignedly. "Perhaps in this day and age, we are."

"I'll tell thee, I'm not going to be peculiar. I don't care what anyone says. I'm not going to be," Sarah whispered vehemently. She was sitting cross-legged on the double bed reserved for Phebe and her on the third floor of their aunt's house. "How can thee calmly brush thy hair as though nothing important has happened?" she demanded.

"We must accept such incidents," Phebe answered, deftly placing the white cap on her neatly coiled hair. "I was a little frightened though. Was thee?"

"Thee did look frightened," Sarah answered her sister honestly. "And I was tempted to throw a few stones back at these people."

Phebe arranged her face to convey disapproval but a look at her little sister, sitting flushed with wounded pride and anger, made Phebe's resolve to lecture her disappear.

"Thee should control thy anger," Phebe managed to say before breaking into a smile. "It certainly would have given those boys something to ponder—a Quaker throwing stones."

Sarah threw her head back and laughed aloud, a melodious low sound unlike the silly giggles and demure smiles of other girls.

"Phebe, will thee help me persuade Aunt Susanne to let us shop in the city? I'd love to visit the Farmer's Market along the wharf, maybe buy some gingham for a new dress. Thee is almost grown now so perhaps she'll let us go for a short time?"

"Where did thee ever get the idea of a gingham dress?" Phebe asked sharply.

"I saw one on a girl coming into the city," Sarah replied unabashed. "Doesn't thee think we'd look marvelous in bright colors for a change?"

"Marvelous. Another worldly expression," Phebe admonished gently. "Aunt Susanne's response to thy request will be far from marvelous, I assure thee."

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Certainly not," Uncle Thomas said without hesitation. "Totally inappropriate." He, like his sister Eliza, had a constant careworn expression on his round face."

"Definitely not," Aunt Susanne added with a withering glance at Sarah. "No young ladies or children will travel about the city unescorted."

"Yes, Aunt," Sarah answered politely. "Then would thee escort us to the Farmer's Market near the wharves?" She lowered her eyes as Aunt Susanne's jowls quivered with indignation.

"Child, where has thee picked up such notions?" her aunt began in a voice reserved for the deaf. "I have a full afternoon planned for the three of us. Not having children of my own, this is a very special occasion for me."

Sarah swallowed her disappointment and, after a nudge in the ribs from Phebe, remembered to murmur her thanks.

Seeing only those places Aunt Susanne considered respectable for young ladies in her charge didn't dampen Sarah's enthusiasm once they climbed into her aunt's surrey. Sarah found herself peering this way and that, stretching to get a better look up the mouth of the Providence River with its array of bridges, docks and ships.

"I would like thee to see the new Moses Brown School," Aunt Susanne said. "Phebe, dear, thy mother never replied to my recent suggestion regarding thy schooling. I'm not a modern woman, but I can see where advanced education can be a valuable preparation for marriage and motherhood."

"No, Mother never mentioned anything. Why, Aunt?"

"Through the Providence Meeting, I know certain well-placed members of the board of supervisors. Financial considerations have never been a problem for thy uncle and myself. What I am trying to say is that I would love to have thee join our household and attend the school. What an opportunity for thee, so far beyond anything at Fairview. I will be discussing it with thy father tonight."

Sarah squirmed and fidgeted as Aunt Susanne sank back into the cushions of the surrey, satisfied with herself and her plans. She had no weapons or words to counter her aunt's wishes, no way of saving Phebe from the woman beside her. As though reading her thoughts, Phebe leaned forward, silently raised one gloved finger to her lips, and smiled reassuringly before glancing quickly away.

Thank thee, Susanne. Thy offer is most kind and comes from a good and generous heart. We cannot accept it since Phebe will be needed at home when Eliza's time comes after the new year. Eliza and I also feel the girls should have some say in their future.

Francis

Fairview Village, in the gray light of a late January afternoon in 1863, had the look of a place at peace with itself, a look that could be deceiving. The Salisbury Thread Company kept Rhode Island's small town, Fairview, alive, while adding to the town's diversity and size. Amidst the nasal clipped tones of third and fourth generation villagers could be heard the bastardized French of Canadians, the soft slur of the Galway Irish and, lately, a veritable flood of Italian.

Some folks in Fairview welcomed this change, others realistically accepted it as the price paid for prosperity, while a handful remained hostile to the foreign elements in their midst. In the Quaker conclave centered around the meetinghouse at the opposite end of town from the mill and the foreigners, change was regarded with much the same attitude as in the past: It was ignored.

Francis Comstock, by virtue of his general store at the heart of the village, had more opportunity than many of his Quaker brethren to observe the changing character of the townspeople. And if this exposure to worldliness tempted him, no one saw evidence of it. The Religious Society of Friends was his main concern. The politics of God, not men, governed his life and was the guiding principle in the raising of his children, Phebe and Sarah.

As his youngest daughter walked along the Killingly Pike near his store this late January afternoon, she thought neither of Fairview nor its populace. Sarah, instead, was deeply involved in the kind of politics that would have made her father blanch.

"Look, God," Sarah muttered angrily, "Thee just isn't holding up Thy end of our deal. I have been so good it hurts. Thee can't mean for this to happen to me. I know that Thee has probably been preoccupied with the war and all, but a deal is a deal. Anyway, I'm sure that the books aren't really that bad. And I promise—"

"What books, Sarah?" Phebe interrupted. "Thee is talking to thyself aloud."

Sarah jumped. "Thee gave me a start. Where's thee going?"

"To find Father. He must return home quickly. Something's terribly wrong and no one will tell me anything."

Sarah looked closely at her sister and noticed her eyes were wider than usual, her face drawn. But Sarah dismissed Phebe's anxiety in favor of her own. "Phebe, I'm really in trouble this time. Ann Worthington caught me leaving the public library carrying a whole stack of books. She's told Mother."

"Oh, no. That's not possible. Mother went into labor hours ago, well before her time. Now Kezia Mott wants me to fetch Father home, and I must find Friend

Worthington, too."

It was Sarah's turn to look wide-eyed. "Does thee think we may be allowed to be with Mother?"

"Doesn't thee have any sense?" Phebe said, exasperated. "We're much too young."

"I think it's exciting no matter how much thee tries to frighten me."

"Sarah, doesn't thee listen at all? Something is wrong with Mother."

"I'll go get Father," Sarah said, slightly chastened. "Now, don't worry. Mother will be fine."

With that, she turned and ran to the store, brown hair flying behind her like a cape, her eagerness to tell Father the news propelling her long legs faster. An hour later, Sarah found herself almost incapable of motion. Her mood had swiftly changed to one of fear. Painful gasps, punctuated by muffled screams, were audible through the closed bedroom door.

"Now, Sarah, thy mother is a strong woman. She will fare well," Francis repeated from time to time, as though the words, once spoken, would have the power to make it happen.

"Dear God," Sarah whispered softly, ignoring her father's words. "If Thee allows her to live, I shall never go to the public library again. Never."

Her prayer was interrupted by a baby's cry from the bedroom adjoining the kitchen. Father jumped from the chair and abruptly sat down again when Ann Worthington opened the bedroom door.

"Thee has thy first son, Francis Comstock. The baby and Eliza are fine. Thy wife needs rest. It was difficult for her at her age."

Francis, unashamed of the tears forming in his eyes, quietly thanked Ann for her assistance.

Over the next week, Ann Worthington quietly prepared meals, bathed Eliza's fevered head, and helped the baby nurse from his weakening mother. For Sarah, a patina of unreality covered the routine of her life.

The only thing Sarah did with any effectiveness was her old familiar bargaining with God. Each new day she made yet another deal, upping the ante so that by the following Sunday, Sarah had nothing left to promise in return for her mother's life.

And on that Sunday, Sarah stopped all bargaining with God when Eliza Comstock, upon hearing of the death of her son Francis, age six days, closed her eyes and drew her last breath. Sarah wasn't present, hadn't been able to say farewell or whisper words of love. Ann Worthington had insisted the family attend meeting, knowing Eliza wouldn't want them missing Sunday worship.

Sarah, on her return from the meeting, listened quietly to Ann Worthington's description of Eliza's death. She stared at her mother's silent form cradling the small figure of her son. She saw her father gently caress Eliza's cold face and touch a wisp of the baby's Comstock hair. She followed him to the kitchen and watched as he placed his head on the table, his thin shoulders shaking from silent, racking sobs more terrible than anything she had ever witnessed.

Phebe stood by the kitchen door, her cloak not yet removed. She hadn't gone to look upon her mother and brother. Her face, white and pained, remained immobile like her body, the meaning of her mother's death too overwhelming to ponder.

"She didn't suffer?" Sarah heard herself ask Ann slowly. "And the baby?"

"No, the fever brought them both beyond feeling pain. She was aware at the last and knew of her baby's death. Dear girl, a gentle death like that is God's kiss on the soul, a beautiful sign of her future."

God's kiss on the soul, Sarah screamed inwardly. Old Mr. Salisbury died a quick death just last week and one couldn't have met a nastier person. God's way left much to be desired, for He hadn't kept His end of a bargain once.

Words, soft and gentle, penetrated Sarah's brain, words spoken in her mother's firm voice, now only a memory. "Thee must quiet thy anger, daughter. God's ways, no matter how unjust, are mysterious. Thee must learn to accept."

Slowly Sarah walked over to her father's bent form. "Thee still has Phebe and I, Fa."

Francis didn't answer. His body remained slumped over the table, shoulders slowly moving up and down, the rhythm interrupted by occasional shudders.

"Fa, thee must stop. Mother wouldn't have wanted thee feeling thus." Silence enfolded the room and Sarah waited fearfully.

"She was too old. I shouldn't have been selfish," Francis murmured so softly that Sarah had to strain to hear the words. "Dear God, I was wrong."

"It was God's will, not thine," Ann contradicted while patting his shoulder comfortingly.

"Fa, Mother looked forward to having Francis," Sarah said with a maturity belying her eleven years. "Don't punish yourself."

Phebe continued to stand apart from the three figures by the table, and when Francis finally lifted his head, his eyes met those of his older daughter. For a brief moment, he believed that hers alone held a look of accusation.

In the two years since Eliza's death, Francis had aged swiftly. Now as he spoke from the elders' facing bench, he brushed hair streaked with gray away from a weary face.

Sarah heard a stomach rumble, a person cough, and she tried to listen to her father. The war had gone on far too long. Quakers were needed now. They must give of their money, themselves if possible, to help those lives touched by the evils of war. Nurse the sick, teach the ignorant, feed the poor.

The elders shook hands signaling the end of Sarah's hour-long torment. She touched Ann Worthington's hand briefly and braced herself for the formalities at the meetinghouse door.

"Good day to thee, Sarah. How well thee looks, Phebe."

"Good to see thee, Cousin John."

"No, thank thee," Sarah overheard Ann Worthington say. "I'm supping with Francis and the girls. Yes, she's such a handful. No, I hadn't heard."

Sarah and Phebe exchanged knowing glances, and Sarah's heart pounded unusually hard as she greeted her fellow Friends. And when the Comstocks bent their heads in silent prayer over the midday meal, Sarah knew from her father's pained profile that he, too, had heard of her latest transgression.

To Sarah, the meal was endless, each bite threatening to catch in her throat.

"Sarah, I'd like a word with thee in the parlor," Francis said as he rose from a scarcely touched meal. "Now."

Sarah followed him into the parlor and when they settled themselves in the formal highback chairs, they faced one another squarely, not as indignant father and penitent daughter.

"It seems that all in meeting except myself know of thy doings," Francis began. "Thee has always been strong-headed, a trait not unlike one of your mother's. Thee needs to direct that strength in a positive manner."

Sarah's dark eyes met her father's evenly. "I've done nothing wrong, although I will admit to skating on the river and tobagganing on Jerimoth Hill."

"I've been told that thee was with the mill children, that a young man tied on skates and saw thy ankles. And on the 'boggan, thy manner was far from ladylike. Cavorting in this fashion can lead only to disgrace."

"Don't's. That's all I ever hear. Don't do this. Don't do that. From thee, from Ann Worthington, from Teacher Abigail." Sarah stood up, eyes smouldering with resentment.

"Seat thee down, child," her father said sternly. As he looked at her, he knew that he hadn't spoken the truth. She had left childhood behind and now stood uncommonly tall before him, still slim but with the gentle upthrust of small breasts and firmly rounded hips. Her features, once so sharp and thin, had an unusual harmony. Even in his anger, he noted her large, deep-set eyes, the nicely molded nose, high cheekbones, and sensual full mouth. No feature in itself was that fine, but together the effect was astonishing when framed with that thick, wild, brown hair.

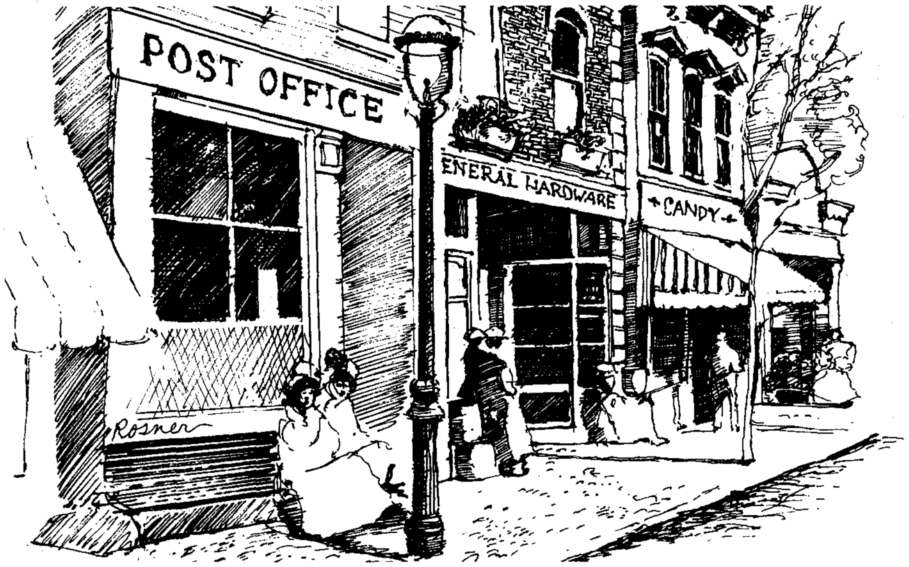
"I know not what to do with thee." Francis said. "I've had little experience with young females, my family being all boys. Thy sister is an orderly creature, sweet and obedient. Thee is another matter."

Sarah reread Phebe's letter before blowing out the candle on the stand beside her bed. For the last two years Phebe had been living with Aunt Susanne Ferris in Providence to, as her father had put it, "learn the womanly graces."

Sarah stretched luxuriously, her long arms raised above her head, her feet nearly touching the end of the bed. At first Sarah had found it difficult to sleep alone without the warmth and comfort of Phebe's soft body next to hers. Now, as she relaxed, she realized she no longer missed Phebe in her bed or, for that matter, in her life.

For the past two years, Sarah had slipped through the net of the Quaker conclave countless times, always in small ways, although she was the first to admit that the infractions were beginning to add up to a sizeable sum. The wearing of a ribbon under her cap, missing meeting due to an unusual illness that frequently appeared on Saturday and cleared up on Monday, bold reading of books from the public library, and gossip had it, learning to play the spinet at that Presbyterian girl's house, a friendship with Heather Norton, musical interests—with it all, Francis Comstock had a difficult time keeping his younger daughter under control.

Sarah could almost see the heads shake and tongues wag each morning as she passed the Quaker homes on River Road on her way to her father's store. Aloof, with no maidenly downcast to her eyes, Sarah shamelessly greeted fellow Quakers—men, women, and children alike—with head held high, a direct look, and a firm handclasp.



If anyone had cared to look deeper, they would have been surprised to find what lay beneath the surface of Sarah Comstock's outrageous behavior. Heather Norton, small, quiet, and frequently occupying a window seat in the public library, was one who stubbornly brushed aside Sarah's aloofness, and, in the process, melted her cool reserve.

"Oh, Heather, they do not understand me," Sarah had often confided. "They condemn without mercy, scared by anything or anyone different. I know they call me a freak. Perhaps I am one in height." She smiled self-consciously before adding defensively, "It's lovely being tall, though."

Pebbles hit the clapboard framing near Sarah's bedroom window, interrupting Sarah's reverie. She jumped from bed and stuck her head out the window. In the bright light of the full moon, she saw Heather standing below, her appearance far from meek in a pair of her mother's notorious bloomers. She was trying, rather unsuccessfully, to throw a second pair of borrowed bloomers up to Sarah.

"Forget it," Sarah whispered. "I'll come down like this. Wait there."

Within a minute, Sarah, now attired in bloomers, and Heather were groping their way through the alley between River Road and Killingly Pike.

Sarah shivered with anticipation as she thought of their destination. Up on Mill Road, the days surrounding late June full moon were occupied by the annual festival. For three days work halted at the factory. Smells of exotic dishes and the sounds of equally foreign music drifted down to the village. Tables laden with sausages and pasta, pork pies and grouton, dumplings and boiled meats, competed for space on the edge of the rectangular green in the midst of the row houses, while musicians and dancers entertained on platforms in the green's center.

The night was warm. The moon was reflected on the water, and a soft breeze rustled through Sarah's hair and around the edges of her bloomers. It was a night made for adventure, and her eyes began to shine with the exhilaration of the forbidden.

"Heather, look at the beautiful colors. Their God must be a much happier One than ours. Look at their gaiety. Widow Worthington would have apoplexy."

Both girls watched mesmerized as four swarthy men played instruments Sarah couldn't identify since the mandolin, viol, fiddle, and accordion had not yet become part of her vocabulary. Women wore billowing, multicolored skirts; loose blouses allowed their bare arms to be swung through the arms of men dressed as brilliantly as the women.

In the torchlight, the dancers had a grace and beauty unseen at the factory workbench or on the village street. Sarah forgot her surroundings, totally losing herself to the music and warmth and gaiety. Irish men and women with strange wooden shoes were coming toward the center of the green while heavily muscled men in shirtsleeves laid boards on the grass. Sarah turned to ask Heather about this latest development when she sensed rather that saw a movement behind them.

Deep-set, coal black eyes stared at

Sarah in the flickering light. Slowly they appraised her plain shoes and the gap between stockings and bloomers. Dark slashes of raised eyebrows became visible as the black eyes noted her bloomers and then continued up over her thin chemise to stare into Sarah's equally deep-set eyes. There was a similar, if not quicker, examination of Heather who flinched under the gaze. Slowly the young man with the deep-set eyes moved out of the shadows and approached them.

"Welcome to thee, Friend Comstock and Miss Norton," he said with a hint of mockery in his voice.

The plain Quaker speech sounded ludicrous in his crazily accented English, and Sarah, forgetting her fear of being discovered, threw her head back and laughed aloud.

"Excuse me," she exclaimed at last. "But I've never heard 'thee' said quite like that before. Thee already knows us but we don't know thee."

"Oh, we're all the same to you. Just those *Eye-talians* up at the mill," he said.

"Well, thee will fast become a person instead of another Italian in my book if thee gives thy name, please," Sarah shot back quickly.

"Carlo Ghiberti. Ex-floor sweeper, bobbin boy, spool packer, and present apprentice to the chemist in the dye room," he replied, a fierce pride lighting his face as he bowed low to them.

Sarah had never seen hair so curly as his and wanted to reach out and touch it. Instead she studied his face intently while he spoke. Days later she couldn't remember any of his features except to describe them in words like strong, manly and fiery, all to the sound of Heather's laughter.

Now she heard him say to her, "You're a Quakeress, the daughter of Francis Comstock at the general store. He's a fair man. And you're the only child of Mrs. Norton, the livery lady. She's a strong woman."

Heather nodded her head in agreement, trying to hide her fear. She was torn between standing by her friend's side and fleeing. When she saw amusement rather than fright on Sarah's face, she reluctantly elected to stay.

Heather had misread Sarah's expression, however, for her friend was more amazed than amused by Carlo Ghiberti. He was unlike the few young men in meeting with their embarrassed glances and awkward hands and feet two sizes too large for the rest of their bodies.

There was nothing awkward or embarrassed about this graceful Italian. He spoke with such self-assurance that Sarah didn't find it strange when this young man, so soon past boyhood, had stood in judgment of both Francis Comstock and Mrs. Norton.

His eyes were level with hers and Sarah assumed he was her height and nearly as slim. The sleeves of his white muslin shirt covered muscular arms, and Sarah noticed, with fascination, the dark hair curling around the opening of his shirt. Sarah knew she was staring but couldn't help herself, for he appeared to her to be a truly exotic creature; he looked exactly like the evil Lucifer in Heather's Sunday school primer.

Carlo watched the two girls with growing interest. The Quakeress hadn't scurried away, as expected, when he came upon her hiding in those ridiculous clothes behind his Aunt Giovanna's outhouse, although the little Norton girl looked as though she would faint if he so much as sneezed. He dismissed Heather rather quickly and turned his attention back to Sarah. He had heard his share of stories about the village Quakers, mainly from his father who thought them fair and honest, although lacking in manliness. If this Quaker girl was typical, the women obviously had spirit enough for male and female alike.

"Do the Quakers make a habit of sending their womenfolk out in trousers to spy on us up on Mill Road?" he asked teasingly, curious to hear her response.

"We were spying on thee," admitted Sarah unabashed. "But the Quakers would be as angry with us as thee is. Heather and I plotted this and not very well." She gave a rueful smile.

"I'm not angry with you," Carlo said with an expressive shrug of his shoulders. "How else could we have met?"

Heather opened her mouth as if to reply and shut it just as firmly, her words unspoken.

"What is it, Heather? Please don't be afraid of him." Sarah felt ridiculous saying this in front of Carlo.

"Where is your accent now?" Heather asked accusingly, her fear temporarily forgotten. "You speak English as well as I do."

"You're absolutely right. I seem to have lost it suddenly. It's a miracle," he said piously, looking heavenward. "Contact with you foreigners does it every time."

Sarah laughed aloud again, for she liked his testy, cynical brand of humor. "What are they doing now?" she asked, sensing he was no longer disturbed about their being here.

"An Irish clog dance. It's very precise, not like the dances of their more passionate neighbors."

"Thee means that earlier dance?" Sarah asked, eyes shining.

"*La Ciociara*, we call it. And my father will be furious with my sister, Beata, for the way she acted during the dance. She's much older than you and apt to get into a different kind of trouble."

He hoped that his remark would rattle Sarah and smiled to himself as she pulled herself up to her full height.

"I am going to be seventeen soon," she said, stretching the truth a bit.

Carlo surveyed her critically, letting her see the look of open disbelief on his face. She was as slim and straight as his younger brother, Enrico, so unlike the young mill girls he knew. He thought of the Irish girls with their dark hair, freckles and blue eyes, and the plumper Italians, full-breasted by fifteen. They talked constantly of courting and babies, food and feast days. No, this Quakeress was different fresh, unworldly, and alien.

Heather tugged at Sarah's arm. "I do think we should be leaving now. We might be missed if we stay longer."

"Thee is right," replied Sarah. "And as Carlo pointed out to us earlier, we don't belong."

Carlo wanted to laugh when he tried to imagine his family's reaction to these two young girls dressed in their puffy pants. "No, you don't belong. But I welcome the chance to have met you. You've made my night enjoyable."

"What a strange thing to say, Carlo. How could anyone not find happiness with all this going on? I wish I had this kind of warmth and music in my yard. My neighbors are so busy helping to improve the lot of the world, they forget to take care of themselves."

"Perhaps," Carlo answered, his face noncommittal as his mind raced with disturbing thoughts. When this Quaker girl spoke of her people, she was like one of the dangerous chemical mixtures he was beginning to make that, unless controlled, would explode. The Friends were supposedly nonviolent people, yet how had they managed to breed one so full of fire and fury?

"Is it true your Christian name is Sarah?" he asked before turning to leave.

"Yes."

Look, Heather. *Ghiberti*. That's his name," Sarah whispered excitedly, pointing to a page of the library book in her hand.

(Continued on page 63)

A CAMEO FEATURE

The Ghost of Lady Blanche de Varenne

Only in the secret warmth of the tower could the flame of their passion be allowed to burn

With a father known for his ruthless ambition and for his cruelty when his wishes were not obeyed, Lady Blanche de Varenne felt she had little chance of happiness. But even she was not aware of the extent of her father's ambition and did not realize the cold satisfaction he felt as he watched her growing into a beautiful young woman with raven hair and alabaster skin.

Lord Geoffrey de Varenne thought of his daughter only as a means to an end: Her beauty would entice a rich nobleman into marriage, thus increasing the power and wealth of the house of de Varenne.

By the time she reached marriage age, Lady Blanche's beauty had become legendary. Many gallant young men volunteered to wear tokens of her favor in their helmets at the jousting tournaments. But Blanche, who was terrified of her father, never dared to show a preference for any one of them. Once, a foolhardy young knight tried to see her in her chamber, where she spent her days sewing and praying. The knight was arrested before he set foot inside the room and he was put through excruciating torture before he died. Blanche knew she had little love to look forward to. She could only hope that the man finally chosen for her would be less tyrannical than her father.

The day Lord Geoffrey summoned Blanche to tell her of his marriage plans for her, he produced a costly gold ring and beautiful chain. Holding them up, he said, "These are from Sir Gilbert de Clare. They are yours. Take them."

"Who is Sir Gilbert de Clare, my Lord?" asked Lady Blanche.

"He is your betrothed," Lord Geoffrey replied.

By Lorna Hislop

"My betrothed?"

"Yes. Or at least he will be once he has asked you to wed. He awaits you in the chapel. Now, get out!"

Lady Blanche fled. On her way to the chapel she wondered anxiously what the man she would be attached to for the rest of her life would be like and what she would say to him. The knight standing in the entrance of the chapel looked rich and powerful. He was impatiently drumming his fingers on the hilt of his sword. The moment he saw Blanche, he dropped to one knee and kissed her ring.

"Madame," he said, without preamble, "I have spoken with your father and he has given me permission to offer you my hand. I beg you to accept."

He had a rough charm about him, Blanche thought. She noted his strong hands, his weather-beaten face and that, although his words were abrupt, his tone was gentle.

"Sir Gilbert," she replied softly, "you honor myself and my family by your offer. May God see fit to bless our union."

She closed her eyes as Sir Gilbert brushed her lips with a kiss. She accepted his embrace and did not return it, as befitted a chaste young maiden.

Sir Gilbert gazed at her with appreciation. He had chosen well. She was both beautiful and modest. He told her then that he had been in the Crusades and had brought back a wealth of gold and precious jewels. His family castle was in the Aquitaine region of France, now under English rule. His grandmother had been a lady-in-waiting to the famous Lady Eleanor of Aquitaine. He, too, hoped their union would be a happy one.

Lady Blanche's future was settled. She would marry Gilbert de Clare and live happily ever after—or so it seemed. For on the very night of the feast celebrating the betrothal, Lady Blanche set eyes on Sir Rolfe de Capo, a fellow crusader of Sir Gilbert's, and discovered the awesome power of an all-consuming passion.

To Lady Blanche, de Capo looked like a god. His olive skin had been tanned by the suns of the Orient, his perfect teeth flashed with a savage brightness and his gestures were lordly and aristocratic. Blanche's first look at him unleashed inside her a torrent of desire that made her hands tremble and her heart pound. This was no ordinary mortal—this was some divine being that had been put on earth in human form to captivate her soul and forever haunt her dreams.

In the days that followed, Blanche reminded herself over and over that she had pledged her troth to Sir Gilbert and that the wedding would take place within the month. But each time she saw de Capo, the thought of marriage seemed totally unreal.

The first time she watched de Capo in the tournaments, she prayed for his victory. When he came forward to salute Lord Geoffrey and the ladies, his helmet in the crook of his arm, beads of sweat glistening on his face, Lady Blanche felt she would give anything to be able to gently wipe his brow.

"Well done, noble Sir," she said softly, while looking into his eyes. "We have all heard of your gallantry in the Holy Land and are indeed fortunate to witness your skill and bravery today."

"I am fortunate to have such an attentive observer," de Capo said with a smile that pierced Lady Blanche's heart.

Blanche smiled with pleasure and bowed her head slightly. "I hope you will honor us often with your visits," she said.

"Nay, my lady," de Capo replied, "the honor would be mine and I fear I would abuse it by seeking it too often."

Never, thought Blanche. It would be impossible to spend too many hours in his company. His very presence inspired new feelings in her—as if she had been gripped by unknown forces—relentless, urgent, dangerous. She looked up again, seeking those compelling eyes, but instead her gaze met the cool stare of Gilbert de Clare, her betrothed.

What was Sir Gilbert de Clare to her now that she had seen Rolfe de Capo? What were duty and honor to her when compared to the passion that raged in her breast? Why had fate chosen this hour to inflict upon her this yearning for a man she could not have?

As the day of the marriage drew nearer, Blanche decided that, come what may, she must speak to Rolfe de Capo alone. Secretly, she sent word for him to attend her, and he was discreetly admitted to her presence.

"You are brave to come here, my lord," she said, once her lady-in-waiting had left. "My father has spies everywhere."

"I have been praying for such a meeting since I arrived at your castle," he said earnestly. Ever since the betrothal feast, I have loved you but dared not show it. When I received your summons, I feared it might be a trap set for me by my enemies, but I could not stop myself from coming. Now that I see you, you need not tell me why I am here."

"Come to me!" Blanche said, falling into de Capo's arms and burying her head in his shoulder.

His hard chest felt strong and protective to her, and for a moment it seemed as though all problems might vanish. He bent down and sought her lips, which she raised to his as if to drink a magic potion. They remained clasped together for what seemed like an eternity, each giving and receiving the sweet, dangerous draft of love.

Blanche clung to him, praying their time together would never end. Abruptly, her fear of her father returned and she drew back.

"What shall we do," she whispered, looking at de Capo with frightened eyes.

"Must you marry Sir Gilbert?" said Rolfe, caressing her cheek.

"You know I must," she said. "There is no other way. My father has given his word and would kill me rather than break it."

"There is probably only one way," he said quietly. He looked tense and troubled.

"What is that?" she said, a sudden hope leaping in her breast.

De Capo took her face between his powerful hands and looked deeply into her eyes.

"I would have to kill Gilbert," he said.

Blanche gasped and let her head fall forward onto his chest.

"No," she said. "He is your friend. Perhaps I can get Gilbert to withdraw from the betrothal."

De Capo laughed bitterly. "Even if he did I'd be no eligible suitor for the Lady Blanche de Varenne. My fortune does not equal one half of Gilbert's. Besides, he is in love with you."

Blanche sighed deeply. "Yes," she said, "I know he is. That is the worst problem of all."

Instinctively she reached for de Capo again and in his arms she felt safe. Whatever problems lay in their path were nothing compared with the bliss of knowing he loved her. As she felt his lips seek hers again, her only wish was to stay with him forever.

As the days passed, Sir Gilbert de Clare was increasingly attentive to his bride-to-be. For he was now passionately in love with her. Blanche was forced to go through the motions of a formal courtship that was filled with flowery, amorous sentiments; but in her heart, the only emotion she could feel for Sir Gilbert was pity. When he praised her beautiful white skin and composed songs about her raven hair, the only way Blanche could find to accept his compliments graciously was to pretend that they came from de Capo.

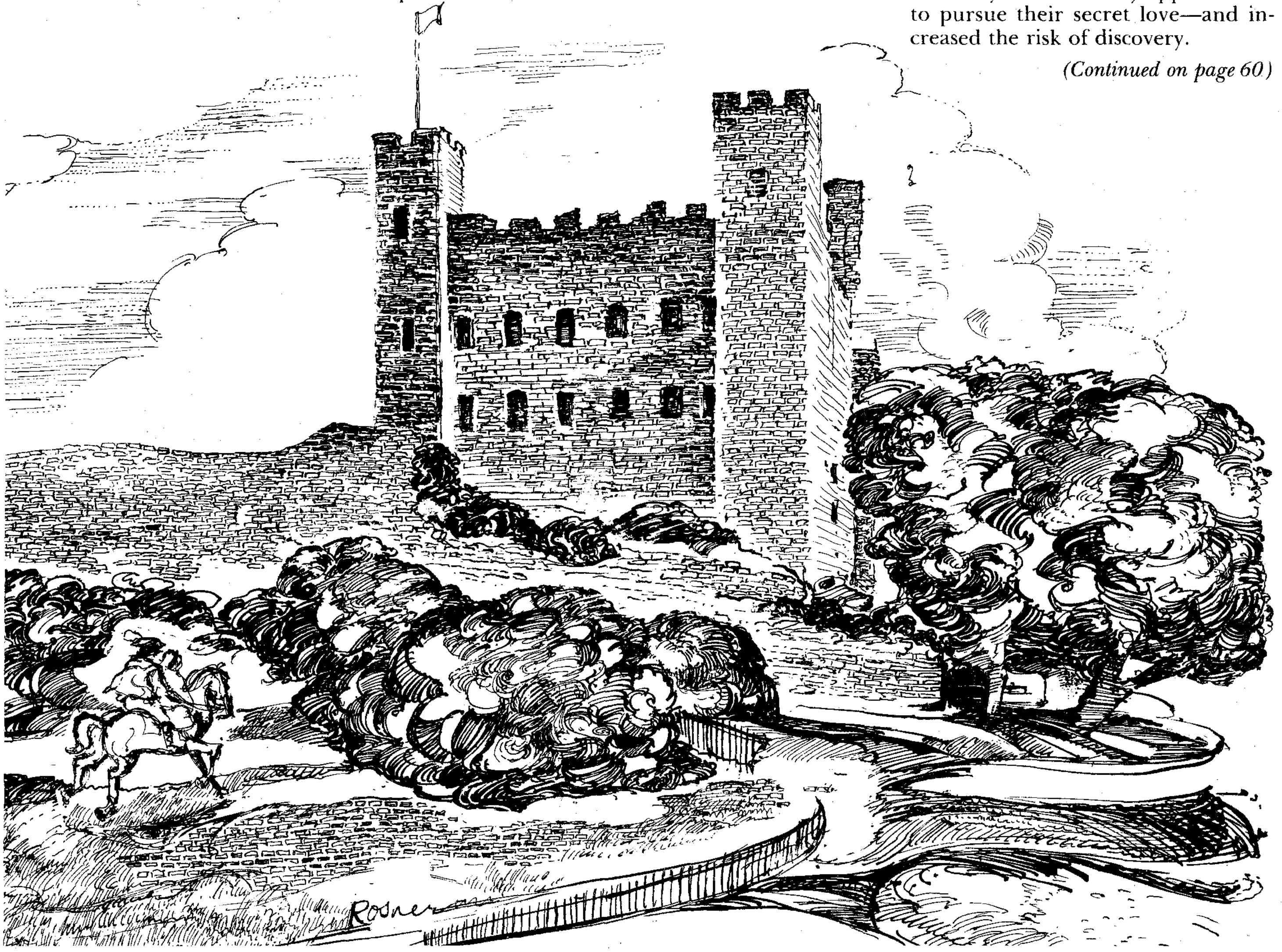
Blanche tried hard not to give in to the temptation to see Rolfe de Capo again, but her love for him was stronger than her will. She had only to think of the warm, safe feeling of his arms around her to long to be with him again. As the day of her wedding approached, they spent more and more time together, knowing that once Blanche was married to Sir Gilbert de Clare, there would be no hope of seeing each other. Blanche would be living in Sir Gilbert's castle in France.

It was not long before other people began to notice that there was some secret understanding between Blanche and de Capo. Whenever he was nearby, Blanche would be happy and gay. However, the moment de Capo left the room her expression changed and she became silent and melancholy. Sir Gilbert noticed this too, and asked his friend to be with them as often as he could in order to keep his betrothed happy. Blanche dreaded the three of them being together more than anything else, for, although she hated deceiving the faithful Sir Gilbert, she continually ached to be in de Capo's arms.

Outside events now played a hand in forcing the story of Lady Blanche de Varenne to its tragic end. The rebellious Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, laid seige to Lord Geoffrey de Varenne's castle. Time and again, the rebels tried to storm the stout walls of the fortress, only to be repelled by Lord Geoffrey's men.

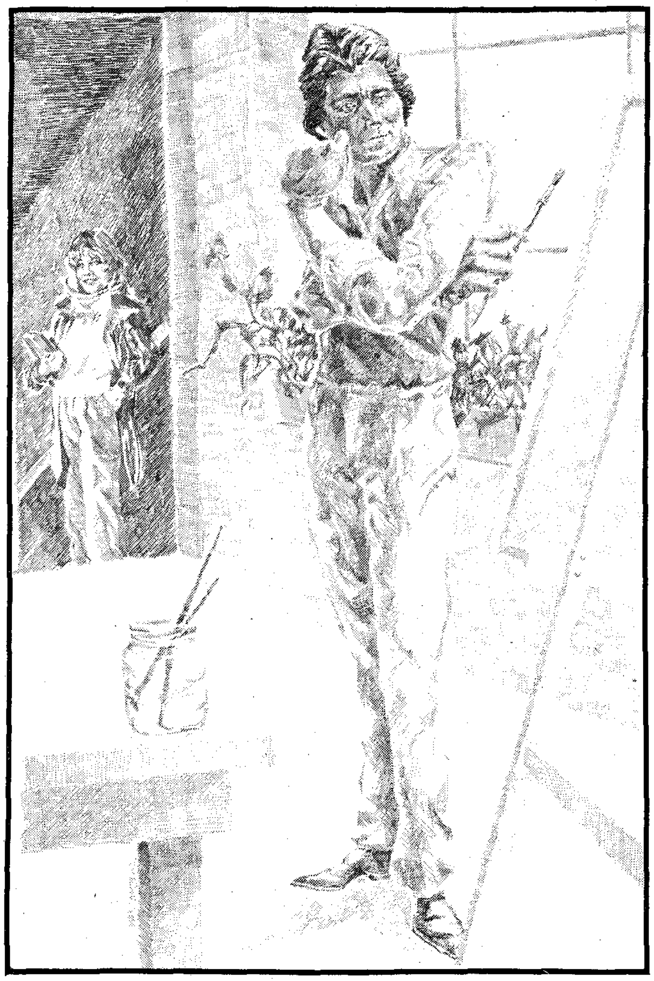
During this period, all thought of the coming marriage ceremony between Lady Blanche and Sir Gilbert was forgotten. As friends and allies of Lord Geoffrey, both Sir Gilbert and Rolfe de Capo remained inside the castle, valiantly fighting off the besieging army. But the siege also gave Rolfe de Capo and Lady Blanche many opportunities to pursue their secret love—and increased the risk of discovery.

(Continued on page 60)



Illustrated by Meryl Rosner

the eye of the beholder



Elizabeth was so busy brooding about herself she never thought about how she looked to him

My first diet occupied my fifteenth summer. Bananas and milk. Milk and bananas. At first I watched for signs of the slender me I knew lurked inside and only needed a banana or two to break out. Life became a blur of banana-and-milk and eventually I hardly dared look in case I was developing knee-length arms and an itch. "Bananas are for monkeys," I said finally and went back to normal food.

A short story by Denise Robertson

The longing to be thin came yearly with spring. Layered in woolens and topcoats, I could fool myself, but when snowdrops and crocuses appeared it was time to put away winter cover-ups and face the awful truth. The year I was sixteen it was bacon and grapefruit, the next year cheese. Then came slimming soups, Melba Toast, beef broth and—a bonanza for my seventeenth birthday—the liquids-only diet. None of them worked for more than a week or two and, as evenings drew in and cold winds blew around corners, I snuggled back into my winter woolens and ate.

I had a nice face. Everyone told me so; my mother and father, Grandma Esther, the children I cared for in my job as a nursery nurse. By the time of the eleventh diet—cucumber and tomato—I was in charge of a day-care unit for toddlers, I was buying a Ford Capri on the installment plan and I lived in a tiny but charming apartment overlooking one of London's greenest gardens.

I had everything I'd ever wanted, including some super clothes—everything, that is, except love.

There were men in my life. Alfred and Brian—and Charlie, to whom I was nearly engaged. But none of them ever looked at me with the eyes of love. They looked at me with kindness, tolerance, affection even. I was "good old Lizabeth" and they would have died rather than hurt me. So it was left to me to tell them firmly when it was time to go. I went for long walks in the garden to prepare the right speech, trying it out on sycamore and lilac and the good old London plane tree.

I loved the trees. "We have a lot in common," I told one of them one day. The tree was a particular friend of mine, but I wasn't prepared for it to answer.

"Do we?" it said. The voice was round and deep and satisfactory and the body that accompanied it, loping from behind the trunk, was equally satisfying. "Do you often eavesdrop?" I said in the acid tones of one caught with egg on her face.

"Only when there are trees involved," he said solemnly, and I had to smile.

His name was Robert Freeman and we were neighbors. He explained it all as we walked between shrubs that were suddenly outlined in gold. "I've seen you going in and out," he said. "My window is above the front door. You leave early and you're always dashing and—"

I finished it for him. "I usually leave something behind."

He laughed. "That's true. But it wasn't what I was going to say. You feed the birds. In the garden. I watch you each morning from across the way."

I had a sudden terrible vision of me, huge in my camel cape and my sensible nursery-type shoes, flinging handfuls of crumbs, a cross between St. Francis and Margaret Rutherford. We parted at the garden

Illustrated by Mark Gerber

gate and I turned down his offer of coffee, pleading urgent shopping.

In fact I window-shopped and while I gazed at my reflection my mind raced. He was attractive, the most attractive hunk of man I had seen for many a moon. The sort of man who would have girls like other men have hairs on their chests. "So don't go cherishing any romantic ideas," I told the fruit-shop window.

Inside, I bought a melon, a squash, four large grapefruit, a head of lettuce and some Jaffa oranges. The twelfth diet— low carbohydrate—had begun.

Bob had girls all right, willowy creatures with inch-long lashes and improbable fingernails. He assured me they came in the course of his work, but any red-blooded male—and he was certainly that—would have fallen for them. They were not only beautiful, they were kind-hearted creatures with infectious laughs and legs that went clean up to their waists. Bob was an artist and specialized in magazine illustration because he liked to eat.

Once he found I could keep my mouth shut he let me sit in on his work. He did preliminary sketches from models and then, usually at night, he worked on the whole picture. I'd make coffee for him or eggs, beans, and french fries, to which he was addicted. I munched my way through my non-carbohydrates, except when we ate Chinese. Even then I tried to stick to bean sprouts, resisting when he dangled prawns before my drooling lips.

It was the happiest summer of my life. He took to calling me "mate" and told me every single detail of his plans. "Some day," he'd say, "I'll really paint. It's there, mate. I know it is. In the meantime, thank heaven for beautiful women . . ."

We went to the Tower of London one Sunday and on another took a trip up the Thames to Kew. When he had dates, he'd rap on my door to see if I approved of the way he looked. I'd wrestle with his tie or brush off imaginary fluff and when his footsteps died away I'd weep buckets. It was a crazy kind of life and it couldn't last.

I lost eleven pounds the first four weeks and then I put the eleven back and four more besides. My downfall was the chocolate éclair, sweet and sticky and oozing cream, only 50¢ each from the bakery round the corner, I kept some in the 'fridge and used them to bolster my morale.

One summer night we walked round London, stopping by the river to watch the lights grow brighter as the sky faded. He took my hand and squeezed it. I would have pulled it away if I could. Forty pairs of small grubby hands to wash before lunch is not the recipe for satin skin. He held on, however, and it was easier to let him.

"There's something magical about a river," he said, "a kind of glamor." And then he leaned forward and kissed me, a comfortable sort of kiss that might have been meant for my mouth but landed on my left eyebrow because of the way I jumped.

I couldn't bear him to kiss me, not there by the river. As he said, a river adds glamor. The dazzle of light on the water, the ghostly sounds of ships far down toward the sea . . . lonely sounds that make you want to embrace someone. And as the saying goes, "In the dark all cats are gray." I could hold my own by the Thames on a moonlit night but in the cold light of day I was a non-starter.

I let him kiss me again at my door by way of farewell and then I sat alone in the darkened apartment and took stock. I was twenty-eight years old—well, nearly—plain, overweight, and a dedicated career woman. I liked children, and having forty of someone else's is the next best thing to having one of your own. I would get an annual increment for the next four years and cost-of-living raises as and when negotiated.

If I must fall in love it would have to be with someone just like myself, an ordinary guy who needed to count the calories. Bill was tall and dark and slim and handsome and awash with beautiful women. I ate two chocolate éclairs and fell asleep.

I gave pressure of work as my reason for avoiding him and went to the movies straight from the nursery. He seemed to accept what I said although he did have a few pungent words to say when I told him I was checking inventory over the weekend.

"What is your inventory in a nursery?" he asked. The second weekend he went north for a wedding and I breathed a sigh of relief. Another weekend of parks and galleries would have finished me.

"Look after my plant," he said, "and borrow a cup of sugar if you need it."

I went down dutifully on Saturday morning and watered the amaryllis. There were two burned pans in the sink, so he'd missed me. I scoured them and began straightening up. An easel stood in a corner, covered with a black cloth. I couldn't resist a peep.

It was a warm and gentle picture, the best thing he had done. The woman's face was rounded and serene and her brown hair was fastened on top of her head and fell in wisps around her face. I put a hand to my own upswept brown hair and fastened back a strand. She was beautiful, that woman, and she was me. I put back the cover and let myself out.

He had painted me as a beauty and it was not a device. That was how he saw me. I couldn't explain it but I knew it was so. I cried then, silly tears for unknown reasons. I thought of him, handsome as Redford or McQueen. And then I thought again.

In my eyes he was handsome. Perhaps that was the trick of it. We are none of us anything except in the eye of the beholder. And somehow, deciding whether his attraction was real seemed unimportant beside the fact that he'd be home on Sunday and I'd be there to greet him.

I had an apple and a glass of milk before bed. There was a solitary éclair in the 'fridge and I gazed at it fondly. It had a lot to recommend it, but it wasn't for me. I didn't need it. The thirteenth diet had just commenced and the staple ingredient was love. ◆

STATION ROAD

Illustrated by Jim Woodend

the Misfit

Eva had always led a double life. But after meeting John she knew she would have to change

A short story by Janey Blair

After trying for twenty-six years to be a credit and a joy to her parents, Eva Rawlinson provided the ultimate calamity by falling desperately in love with the wrong man.

"John Newalls!" her mother wailed through a mouthful of paintbrushes, "A penniless Philistine!"

"He may be penniless, but he's not a Philistine," protested Eva. "He makes parts for gas stoves. Lives on Station Road. I'm sure you'll grow to like him."

She pictured him eagerly pounding along to catch up with her for the local train into town, his anxiety giving way to a great smile as they met.

"You'll love him," she added softly.

"Has he proposed?" asked her mother, swiping a streak of blue across her canvas and cracking her ankle against a rock as she stood back to view the effect.

"Good heavens, no! He just wants me to go out with him."

Her father, who taught dead languages at the university, momentarily came forward three thousand years.

"In ancient days, it was the custom —"

"You'll have to be very careful, that's all. Right arm a little higher."

Eva, dressed as Spirit of Spring in a bit of muslin, welcomed the wave of sunlight that suddenly poured over the garden, raised her right arm a little higher, and lost herself in sad memories.

She had never been a success in her parents' world. Although she had been given the best and kindest guidance, she had only blundered from one error to another. True, her parents had been generous, even in their disappointment.

"Fail if you must, but magnificently," her mother always said, "rather than creep to some petty triumph. Ask a thousand dollars for a canvas, but never let one go for a miserable fifty."

But there had never been anything magnificent about Eva's failures. She had just done the wrong thing, steadily. She couldn't draw; she could only do sums. She was tone-deaf and had atrocious color sense.

Then, when she grew up, she didn't develop the superb contours of a Juno; she was just small and restless.

Worse followed. An impressionable girl in her last year at school, she got hold of a copy of the *Internal Revenue Service Tax Handbook, 1970,* and fell completely under the spell of its insidious prose. Worse again, she understood it.

"How they can let such soul-deadening stuff come within the reach of innocent children," her mother said, "is beyond me—quite beyond me."

An unwise friendship with a student accountant led Eva further downhill. He showed her the books he studied for his sterile trade, gloating with her over the examples of trust accounts and balance sheets. A copy of the *Tax Handbook*, found under her pillow, was promptly confiscated.

"Can't you leave it alone and go in for something more civilized?" her father demanded.

But she could not; the thing had bitten into her too deeply. As soon as she could she took a job with an accounting firm. High test scores found her, within a few brief years, a qualified accountant to the dismay of her parents. As time went on she became an advisor to other accountants, statisticians, and bankers.

Bruce Busby, the toughest bank manager in town, treated her to a cocktail and listened carefully to her suggestions about buying stocks.

Other men paid for her lunches, until they realized that she was earning three times what they were: then she paid for theirs. She tried bringing one or two of these men home, but they only made offers for her mother's paintings and filled the house with dreadful talk about industry's future.

For her parents and for Eva it was a distressing time. Her father came forward three thousand years—from the Persian times—to remonstrate with her. He wanted to see her settle down, produce grandchildren. All she could do in expiation was to complete his tax returns for the last five years, and promise to try to be a better girl. But it was a struggle. Within weeks she had accidently doubled the value of his investments for him. The taint of the city clung to everything she did.

"It's so unwomanly!" her mother moaned.

Everything she could do to alleviate her parents' suffering, of course, she did.

"At the very least you don't have to look like an accountant," they had pointed out, "and please, whatever happens, the neighbors must never know. It's not much to ask."

Eva promised. She wore madly trendy clothes, layer on layer. She stuck ribbons in her hair. She tried to look fluffy and girlish, putting a helpless feminine look on her face by the hall mirror before darting out, and throwing her ankles about like a colt as she ran for the train. She took off the girlish look in the office coatroom, and changed into a neat suit.

"She runs little errands and makes the tea," exaggerated her mother indulgently whenever someone inquired too closely. "It keeps her busy and of course she meets people."

Most of the people she met nowadays were people who were nearly broke. She was getting a reputation for putting ailing businesses back on their feet. Eyes brightened and hearts were eased when her boss said, "I'll send Miss Rawlinson." Bank managers, even Bruce Busby himself, seeing overdrafts reduced, breathed more easily.

Into this difficult double life of hers had come dear John Newalls with a smile that went right into her heart, and for once, she hoped, she was not being unwomanly: she had fallen quite in love.

For her parents it was but one more sadness.

"If only you could have met a painter, or a writer—someone who is in contact with the realities of life—".

"But he is! He's great on stove parts."

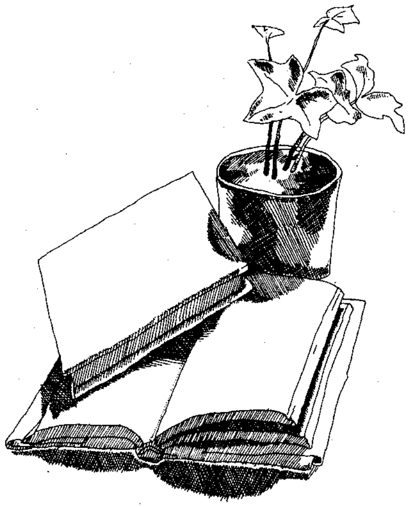
Her mother shuddered.

That was on the day when, standing together in the crowded train, John put his arm around her waist to steady her. It didn't steady her at all. It made her dizzy.

Life became a strange mixture of magic and anxiety. Did John really care as much for her as she hoped? Why was he sometimes so sweet to her—and at other times curiously withdrawn? How could she keep her word and hide the dark truth of her employment from him, and yet share every thought and feeling? Had he seen her reading that article in a nasty little financial magazine? She had stuck it hastily in her handbag but not without confusion. What had he thought? The tug of loyalties was painful.

It was her father who precipitated the end. On the street one hot Sunday, he had met John, who said politely, "Good afternoon, Mr. Rawlinson."

Badly startled, Daddy had evidently lost his head and invited John round behind the laurels to look at his runner beans. Here, posing as Rose Nymph, Eva was helping her mother as usual.



From that day onward, John began to avoid her on the train. Though she looked out for him, almost blatantly, he waved from a distance, or dodged behind a newspaper, or at best talked nervously about the weather.

On Thursday, walking purposefully up the street with her on the way home, he suddenly said, "Eva, it's better if we don't meet for a while."

"Not meet? But why?"

"Before anyone gets badly hurt."

It was nonsense. If it was a choice between not seeing him and being badly hurt by him, she wanted to be hurt—badly—for years.

"Is there something you don't like about me, then?" she asked in a small voice.

"No, no, of course not. It's about me. Something's happened. I'm only going to bring you a load of trouble. And when I saw you in the garden on Sunday—so—so beautiful—"

He gave her a look that many men keep only for an oversized sirloin steak.

"But—"

"No, let me say it, Eva. It came to me suddenly that it was awful of me to risk hurting you in any way. It's wrong. I know you've liked me as much as—what I mean is—I hope it's not too late."

Of course it was late, far too late, but she was a practical girl. "Is there someone else, then?"

He shook his head. "How could there be?"

"Then what sort of trouble? Business?"

"Yes. Don't you worry your little head about it. I've got a very good man; I'm seeing him tomorrow, but it may mean starting all over again." He sighed. "Years of slogging, for pennies. I'm sorry."

Eva pondered. Along the street the house shadows edged forward. Deep within her, loyalties clashed once more. But this time the goodies went down and the baddies triumphed (or maybe it was the other way round).

"Look," she began, "I might be able to help."

His smile, tenderly indulgent, told her that he didn't really need anyone to make tea and run errands.

"I mean it—" she said.

"Eva," he answered, "you are sweet."

He bent and kissed her, suddenly, and the whole of Station Road was lighted up in a silvery-gold haze.

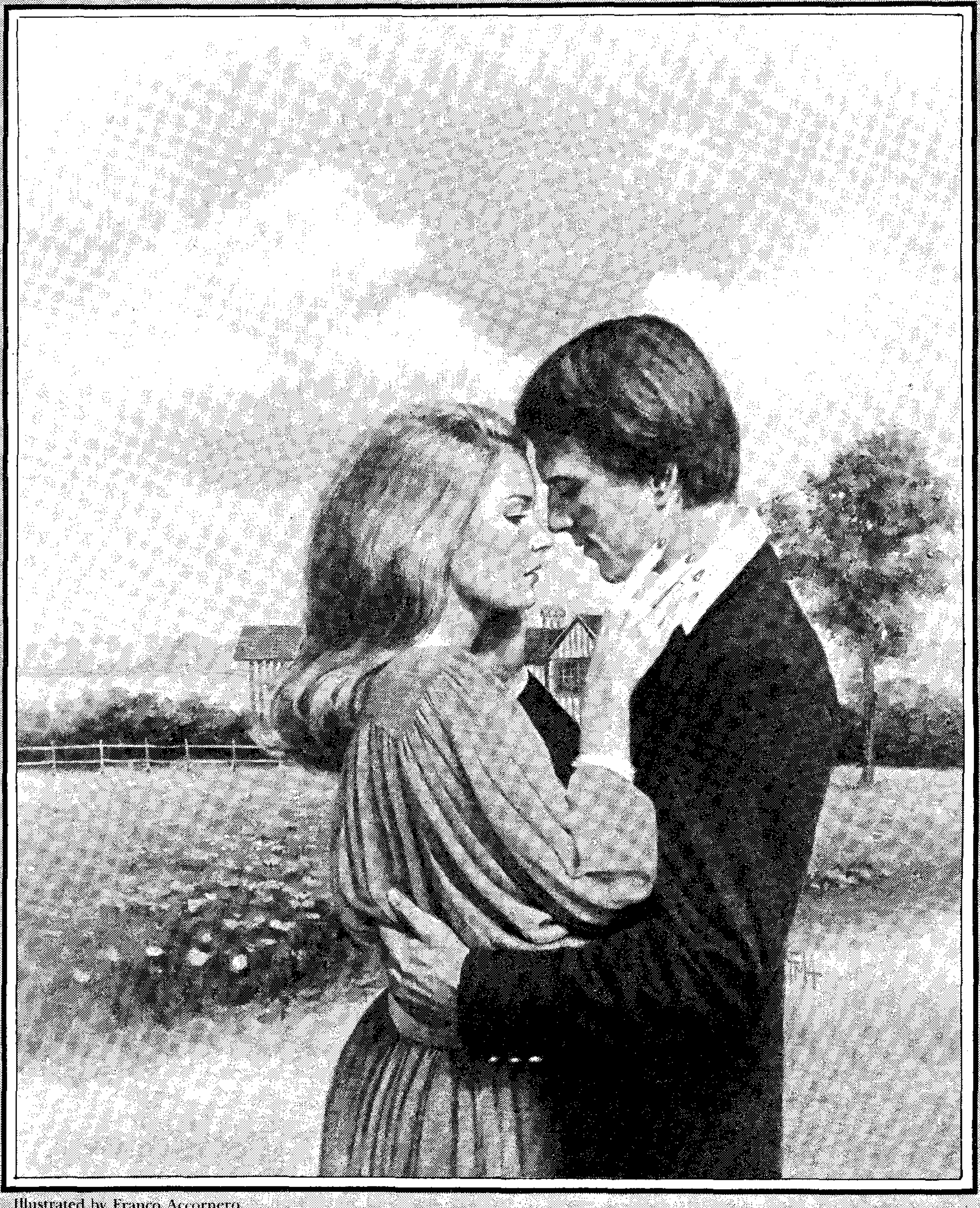
"We'll see what this man says," he went on. "It may not be quite so bad. But I wanted you to know."

They had reached his door and, before she could float free of the haze, he had gone.

(Continued on page 62)

A
CAMEO
NOVEL

the Winter Prince



Illustrated by Franco Accornero

BY MARIA CLISSOLD

A
CAMEO
NOVEL

the Winter Prince

I set out early that sunny June morning from London. I would have close to a two-hour drive and I wanted to have as much of the day as I could at Vine Cottage. Having cleared the outskirts of London I realized, with a bit of a shock, that spring had given way to early summer. The whole world, it seemed, had blossomed, while for me the past months had been overshadowed by Laura Anderson's illness, and then her death. Now I was beginning to feel I was just coming back to life myself after too long a winter.

Though older than my own mother, Laura had been my best friend. She was also a friend to millions of readers through her enchanting Prince Hal books—*The Winter Prince Saga.* Probably I first grew close to her out of gratitude since, through her editor Hugh Lincoln, I became the books' illustrator, a once-in-a-lifetime break for a young unknown artist. A wonderfully rich relationship had developed between Laura and me. Toward the end I realized just how important it was to Laura; during her final illness I was one of very few people she wished to see.

Even her own family was shut out. A cousin called Millie Harper had tried on a number of occasions to see her, but Laura wouldn't have it. Millie, she told me, had remained a small-town person, taken up by gossip and pettiness—concerns utterly foreign to Laura's nature.

How I was going to miss her! I was anxious at the thought of being in her house again; seeing Laura's things, all in their familiar places, but without her, would be painful. I had to take the step and get used to her being gone. That was, in part, the purpose of my trip today.

Laura had bequeathed her beloved Vine Cottage, and all that it contained, to me. And I was well aware that the longer I waited, the harder it would be to overcome the uneasy feeling of trespassing in a very private area of her life. Yet she had wanted me to do just that. I could only wonder, again, as I had since the reading of the will: Why?

Now, as the interminable rows of identical houses thinned and suburbia relinquished its grip on the land, my eyes were refreshed by fields green with pasture and spring wheat.

Laura had always lived in Vine Cottage. It had formerly belonged to the Herington estate where her parents had worked. When Laura was in her twenties, her mother and father had both died and, in a generous gesture to their memory, the Herington family had given the cottage to Laura.

I wondered fleetingly whether the Heringtons now regretted their generosity and would resent my usurping—as it must seem to them—a property that had formerly been theirs.

Laura spoke often of the Heringtons and could reel off their names and dates as if they were closely linked to her. Yet she had had little personal contact with them. They no longer lived in the manor house; Martin, the present owner, was with his married daughter in New Zealand, and Martin's adopted son, Simon, was a concert pianist who had spent the past two years in America.

Laura had lamented the break-up of the family.

"The manor house is rented for most of the year to rich tourists," she had told me. "Sometimes Martin Herington comes back, but the heart went out of him after the tragedy, and I've heard it said that he finds the house too full of sad memories and will never contemplate living there again. He would never sell it, of course, because it has belonged to the family for generations."

I was intrigued by the word "tragedy" which Laura

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had so casually dropped into her remarks.

"I was referring to the death of Simon Herington's wife, a few years ago. Not, of course, that it's the only sadness Martin Herington has known. His brother was killed during the last war."

We had been sitting by the fire. The afternoon light was rapidly fading, for this conversation had taken place during the first winter I had begun visiting Laura at the cottage. I remember how she had leaned forward to poke the blazing logs in the grate. It was almost as if the Herington family's sadness had touched her, too.

"Surely Simon Herington is a young man?"

"He's in his thirties."

"What happened to his wife? Was it an accident, or had she been ill?"

Laura stared into the fire for a long time. "Julia Herington committed suicide," she said at last, very quietly.

This information was so unexpected that I just sat, shocked, gazing at Laura. It was too dark now to see the expression on her face. "Why on earth did she do that? Was it an unhappy marriage?"

But I realized at once that, even if Laura knew, she wasn't going to talk about it.

On many occasions afterward, Laura spoke of the Heringtons, skipping about among the generations as she talked, but she never mentioned Julia again. I learned about Matthew and Joan, who had owned the manor house when Laura was a child, and I heard all about Martin, the present owner, and of his younger brother Henry. They had been about the same age as Laura, and as children they had played together. Martin had been a quiet boy, more interested in his music lessons and choir practices than in romping about the woods. He had gone on to study music at Oxford, and in the late thirties had become a cathedral organist—much to the irritation of his father who would have been happier to see his son devote himself to the estate. Then the war had come, and Martin had joined the navy. Of Henry, Laura did not say a great deal, though I guessed that he had been the more colorful of the brothers. The boys' father would have looked to Henry to take over the running of the estate, but it was not to be. Henry, at the age of twenty-five, had been killed when his Lancaster had been shot down over Germany.

"It would seem," I remarked to Laura on one occasion, "that Simon Herington responded well to being brought up in a musical family. I heard him play once—a program of French music, Debussy and Ravel. I thought he was wonderfully good.

"Yes, he was," Laura agreed.

"You said he was in America, didn't you? I haven't read any newspaper reports of his tour."

"He isn't on tour."

Once again I sensed that withdrawal in Laura, and the subject of the Heringtons was temporarily dropped. All the same, I remained curious about Simon Herington and his wife's suicide, and I made a mental note to try and bring Laura back to the subject when the chance arose.

But it never did. Of the others—Martin and his wife, and the married daughter in New Zealand—Laura Anderson was ready enough to speak. On the subject of Simon and his late wife, however, she would not be drawn out.

Swaynhoe is one of those villages that time and change have mercifully passed by. Entering it is like stepping back fifty years. There are the inevitable rows of neat development houses on its edge, but the village center itself is unspoiled. Dominated by the tower of the Norman church, there are a few sizeable houses, one shop, a straggle of farm cottages, and a very old inn, set halfway down the main street.

And, of course, there is the manor house set back in its park. It had belonged to the Herington family for generations, Laura had told me. Richard Herington had been a staunch ally of Henry VIII and a burgher of repute. The house had been a gift to him and despite additions and alterations over the centuries the core of it was still visibly sixteenth century. Vine Cottage had been built toward the end of the eighteenth century as a gatehouse in the days when carriages cluttered up the lane that had once been an extension of the winding drive leading to the manor. Now the lane was a little-used public way, serving a few scattered farms.

The church clock struck twelve as I drove along the village street. A woman emerged from the shop, which served as both general store and post office, and I heard the ping of the door bell. She glanced curiously at my car, for in Swaynhoe every stranger merits a glance.

When I pulled up outside Vine Cottage, I sat for a moment in the car, just looking at the house that had once been Laura's home and was now my property. It was a pretty cottage, the roof made of fluted tiles, the windows diamond-leaded. The original oak front door had a lion's head door knocker and a big round knob of solid brass. The small front garden, so lovingly tended by Laura, was a riot of roses, lupins, and geraniums. The vine after which the cottage took its name was climbing its trellis round the porch. In good summers, Laura had told me, it bore bunches of small purple grapes, but they were disappointingly bitter. "When I was a child, they always tempted me," she had said with a smile, "but experience eventually taught me that they were forbidden fruit."

Clutching the bag of groceries I had bought en route, I approached the front door, groping in my handbag for the bunch of keys that Mr. Dulfy, the solicitor, had given to me. I was just turning the key in the lock when I heard the sound of a car speeding down the village street. It turned into the lane with a scream of tires and a flurry of gravel, and I swung round, startled, just in time to see a gleaming Bentley pass behind the hedge.

I heard the throb of the engine fade as the car went on up the lane leading to the manor house. So the manor was rented again. I found myself wondering what the tenants were like.

Now, as I entered the hall of Vine Cottage, my first impression was of joyful familiarity. I knew every chair and table, every book, flower vase, piece of pottery, in this little house.

I dropped the keys on the hall table, and walked through to the kitchen. Desperately thirsty, I congratulated myself on having had the foresight to buy tea bags. The power and the gas would undoubtedly have been cut off, but I knew Laura kept some emergency camping equipment in the kitchen cupboard. There was one thing, however, I hadn't counted on. I held the kettle over the sink and turned on the tap. Nothing happened. I tried the other tap. Nothing.

I hadn't eaten since very early that morning, but the rolling of my empty stomach was bearable. My thirst, however, was not, and the knowledge that it could not immediately be slaked made it worse. The only solution was to walk to the village shop and buy lemonade or cola, at the same time asking Mrs. Stockley about the water supply. I was almost out the door when I had the shock of my life.

The telephone rang.

I stared at it in disbelief. The insistent ringing seemed to fill the cottage. It was a kind of violation in that silent house. Then, at last, I found the will to answer it.

For a moment there was silence at the other end of the line; then a man's voice spoke, questioningly.

"Laura? Is that you, Laura?"

"No, this isn't Laura."

"Is she there? May I speak to her?" The voice was commanding.

"Who is speaking?" My own voice was hardly more than a whisper.

"Please tell Laura that Simon Herington would like to talk to her."

The Bentley. It hadn't been some tourist on his way to the manor. Simon Herington had come home. And, dear God, he didn't know about Laura. I should have to tell him.

He was speaking again, impatiently now. "Are you there? Would you mind bringing Laura to the telephone, please?"

I pulled myself together. "I'm sorry. I'm very sorry. You obviously don't know. Miss Anderson—Miss Anderson died several months ago."

I heard the faint hum of an open telephone line. I thought I heard the man at the other end of it suck in a deep breath. Then, after what seemed an eternity, he said, "Then who are you?"

"My name is Anna Compton. I'm—I was a friend of Laura's. I've come down to the cottage to . . ." But this was no time to explain that Vine Cottage now belonged to me.

After what seemed an interminable silence, Simon Herington spoke again in a quiet and controlled voice.

"I'm coming down. I'll be there in five minutes."

No "Do you mind?" or "May I?"—as though Simon Herington was used to giving commands and having other people fall in with his wishes.

I heard the click of the gate latch and firm footsteps on the gravel path. I was torn between resentment at Simon Herington's imperiousness and an overwhelming curiosity. I had the front door open before he had time to knock. We stared at each other. He was a tall, dark-haired man with a severe face.

"Miss Compton?"

"Yes, I'm Anna Compton. Won't you come in?"

He strode past me, and went through to the little sitting room. The lack of hesitation told me that he was as familiar with this house as I was.

"Your news came as a complete shock. I can hardly believe it. Laura had written to me from time to time, but when the letters stopped, I assumed that she was in the throes of another book. Laura's books took precedence over everything else."

"I know."

The dark eyebrows were raised. "Indeed?"

"I work—worked—with her. I was her illustrator."

"So you're *that* Anna! I ought to have guessed. Your name cropped up in her letters from time to time. But the news that Laura was dead put everything else out of my mind." He brushed a hand across his face. "When—how—did it happen?"

"Laura died several months ago. The old illness—" I swallowed. "The cancer hadn't been wiped out, as everyone hoped. It flared up again. This time it was inoperable."

"I wish I had known in time. I would have come back."

"I doubt if she would have wanted you to," I said. Then, seeing the black frown, I added hastily, "She kept it from her friends, right until the end. She couldn't bear the thought of condolences and flowers and get-well cards. She wasn't like that."

"I know very well what she was like. I'd known her all my life. Yet it would seem that she chose to tell *you*."

"Laura and I were very close." His remark stung me.

"Close enough, in fact, for you to come down here and start going through her things. May I ask how you obtained entrance to the cottage?"

I felt myself flushing. "Laura's solicitor handed the keys over to me." Seeing his look of incredulity I added, "Laura made a will leaving this cottage and all the contents, with the exception of her manuscripts, to me. Her manuscripts and the copyrights to her published books go to Hugh Lincoln, her editor."

"The cottage has been standing empty since Laura's death?" He sounded disturbed.

"I understand that Mrs. Stockley, who runs the village shop, has the only other set of keys."

During this conversation, Simon Herington had fixed me with an intense and decidedly hostile gaze.

"How often have you been down here?"

"This is my first visit since Laura died. I'd been here about five minutes when you telephoned."

"If the house has been empty all this time, how is it that the telephone was still connected?"

I had the distinct impression that he didn't believe a word I had said, which angered me. "I've no idea. Everything else has been cut off, even the water. I wanted to make myself a cup of tea but the taps are dry and I don't know how to turn them on." Rather idiotically I added, "I'm terribly thirsty."

Without a word he strode past me to the kitchen and tried the water taps. Then, with an exclamation, he groped in the cupboard under the sink and a moment later water hissed and spurted its way into the sink. Then Simon Herington flicked the kitchen light switch. Nothing happened.

"Well, at least you have water," he said abruptly. Then, with shocking bluntness, he said, "Where did Laura die?"

"In a London nursing home. Hugh and I were with her nearly all the time toward the end."

"Hugh?"

"Hugh Lincoln, her editor. We were both very fond of Laura."

He seemed to brush that fact aside. "And the cottage stood empty before she died?"

I had begun to tire of the inquisition. "I've no idea what arrangements Laura made when she finally agreed to go into the nursing home. In any case, does it matter?"

"It might," Simon Herington said.

He stood staring out the kitchen window at the garden. "So Vine Cottage now belongs to you, Miss Compton. That's quite a windfall, isn't it? What will you do, sell it?" His voice was bitter.

"Good heavens, no!" His suggestion shocked me. "I like the place far too much for that. In any case, it would have broken Laura's heart."

"The cottage was our property once. It belonged to the Heringtons."

"I'm sorry if you regret your family's generosity in giving it to the Andersons, but what's done can't be undone."

"I would be prepared to buy it back."

I stared at him in astonishment. "Why on earth should you want to do that? You have the manor and, from what I've been told, you don't even have much interest in *that*."

He looked furious. "You haven't taken very long to brush up on the village gossip, Miss Compton!"

"I haven't spoken to a soul in the village," I retorted. "It was Laura who told me that you had been in America for the past two years, and that your father lives in New Zealand."

"So you know all about me."

"As a matter of fact I know very little about you," I replied steadily. "Laura was always willing to talk about the Heringtons—she seemed to be fascinated by your family—but she was most reluctant to bring you into the conversation."

"She was a very loyal person." For the first time, that hostile mask cracked. There was pain in the dark eyes.

At that moment the telephone shrilled again. "This is ridiculous!" I said helplessly, and went to answer it.

"Anna!" It was Hugh. "So you *are* there. I tried the village post office and they told me this number hadn't been disconnected. Anna, why didn't you tell me you were going down to Vine Cottage? I would have taken the day off and come with you!"

I don't know why I was so annoyed. Hugh's telephone call seemed an intrusion. The thought of his wanting to come down to Vine Cottage on my very first visit—well, that was too much. I was aware of Simon Herington watching me. His face was stony. Hastily I said to Hugh, "Did the people at the post office explain why the telephone hadn't been cut off?"

"It's a mystery to me," he said, "but it doesn't matter now. Will you be coming back this evening?"

"I'm not sure just what I shall do, Hugh. I just got here. I may stay overnight."

"Well, why don't I drive down later in the day? There must be a decent restaurant—"

"No!" I said sharply. "Thanks all the same, Hugh, but I would rather be by myself for a while. Coming back here—well, it's difficult. Surely you can understand?"

"All the more reason for you to have company," he insisted. "And I'm eager to start looking through Laura's manuscripts."

"Hugh, please!" I found I was gripping the telephone very tightly. "Look, I'll get in touch with you as soon as I come back to London. I must ring off now. I'll be in touch. Good-bye, Hugh."

He began to say something else, but I replaced the receiver. Simon Herington was staring thoughtfully at me.

"So someone else knows the telephone is working?"

"It was Hugh—Laura's editor. He rang the post office and they told him the line was still connected."

"Do I understand he's on his way down here?"

I suppose I could have told Simon Herington to mind his own business. Yet he had been a close friend to Laura. This cottage had probably been as much a home to him as the manor house had been, perhaps even more so. Already he had found a complete stranger in possession of it; now he must be wondering how many of my friends were going to turn up here. So I answered him quietly and politely. "Hugh wanted to come down. He's anxious to look through Laura's manuscripts. Also he felt that I might find it a bit strange being here on my own. But I prefer it that way."

"Will you stay overnight?" He was still studying me.

"I really don't know. I've hardly had time to think yet."

"And I have intruded on you," he said abruptly. "Please accept my apologies, Miss Compton. I assure you it won't happen again."

He was at the door before I could speak.

"I'll wish you good-bye," he said.

A moment later the door had closed behind him, and I was alone.

Later that afternoon, I walked up the village street and into the post office-cum-shop. I had been here only once or twice when Laura was alive, and so I was surprised when the woman behind the counter addressed me.

"Miss Compton, isn't it? My husband took a telephone call for you an hour ago. We reckoned as you would be at Vine Cottage. Sad business, about Miss Anderson. Such a nice lady. Real fond of her in the village, we were."

"I'm sure you were," I agreed. "She was a great friend of mine." After a moment's hesitation, I added, "You know, of course, that Vine Cottage belongs to me now."

She nodded. "You'll be wanting the other keys, I daresay. I'll go and get them for you. My husband keeps them locked away."

"Until I move into the cottage it would be a good idea if you kept them," I said. "That is, if you'll go on keeping an eye on the place for me."

Until that moment I hadn't really decided but, standing in that quiet little shop with its jumble of candy, postcards, pots and pans, and groceries, I suddenly knew, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that I was going to make my home in Swaynhoe.

Mrs. Stockley's face lit up. "That's the best news I've heard in a long while, miss! We've all been wondering what would happen to the cottage, now that Miss Anderson has passed away. Some said as you would sell it, and some as you would let Frank Harper have it to rent, him being on such bad terms with Millie and looking for a place of his own."

"Who's Frank Harper?"

"Why, Miss Anderson's grand-nephew, as you might say. Millie Harper's grandson. He lives with her, his parents having been killed in a car accident years ago. Ever since Miss Anderson died he's been trying to find out what was going to happen to the cottage. Never known Millie Harper to spend so much time in my shop as she has these past few months."

I sensed that I had a potential ally here, but I shouldn't need one. After all, Millie Harper had been barred from Vine Cottage at Laura's express wish. I was the new owner, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Anxious to change the subject, I said, "Well, I'd like to buy a few things while I'm here, Mrs. Stockley. I'll be staying overnight, and there's nothing in the cottage at all."

As I began to order, and she to put provisions on the counter, I asked her about the telephone. She paused.

"Well now, that *is* odd, and no mistake, but, you see, it was what Miss Anderson wanted. Miss Anderson, poor lady, knew before she went into that nursing home that she wouldn't be coming back. In some ways she could be very tidy, though when she got down to writing she didn't so much as remember what day of the week it was. But once she knew—well, what she knew—she had a right good sort-out. Said to me once she didn't want to leave things in a mix-up. Anyway, the day before she went up to London for the last time, she had me round to the cottage, showed me where everything was, asked me to have the electricity turned off and all that. But that telephone of hers, well, she said she'd written a letter to the telephone people and sent them a check so's it wouldn't be cut off."

"Did she say why?"

"Well, it has to do with Mr. Herington, you might say."

"Mr. *Simon* Herington?" I was totally confused.

She nodded. "You wouldn't know him, miss, him having been in America all this time, but in the old days he was in and out of Vine Cottage like it was his home, and Miss Anderson never gave up hoping he might come back and if he did, well, what with the manor being rented as it is half the time, he might have wanted to move into Vine Cottage, just for a time, until he got himself sorted out. If I was to see him at any time, I was to give him the keys and get things switched on and clean the cottage and such like. And him being used to having a telephone and probably wanting to ring London all the time, she didn't want as he should be cut off, if you know what I mean."

"But Mr. Herington *is* back!"

A startled face was raised to mine. "He can't be, miss. I would have known."

"I think he only arrived in the village a few minutes after I did. I saw a car go past, up to the manor, and a few minutes later he telephoned, and then he came round to the cottage."

Her face had gone pale. "Does he know, miss? About Miss Anderson?"

I nodded.

"Oh, dear Lord, he must have been upset. Ever so close to her, he was. It was almost like there was blood between them, they were that fond of each other. Mark you, he won't want the whole village knowing he's back. He went away because of cruel tongues. People talk a deal too much, particularly some as I could mention."

I paid her for the groceries, replied to her assurances of help and walked slowly back up the lane. As I approached Vine Cottage, I noticed that the hedge needed clipping and the garden needed attention. I stood with my hand on the latch of the gate, staring at my little house, when suddenly a voice came from behind me.

"Afternoon, miss. Come to see the place, then, have you? Reckon you'll find there's a tidy bit of work needs doing, the house having been empty for so long. Glad to give you a hand, any time."

A man was lounging against a tree, on the other side of the lane. He had been in shadow, but he stepped out into the sunlight. I saw that he was lean and muscular; he might have been in his early thirties. He was wearing faded denims and an open-necked shirt.

"Who are you?"

"Name's Harper, miss. Frank Harper. Relation of Miss Anderson. You'll be the young lady she left the cottage to, I shouldn't wonder."

He stepped forward, shoving his hands into his pockets in an insolent way. "Used to work on the estate when I was younger," Frank Harper said. "Started as a gardener's boy when I left school. But I soon got fed up with that. Real skinflints, them Heringtons. So I told 'em what they could do with the job and left." He studied his fingernails. "Work in the hospital now. Porter, pushing the old crocks about. It's not so bad and, being shift work, I get days off here and there." Those very bright eyes were assessing me. "So, being as how I'm used to gardening, I could give you a hand with this place. It's a right shambles!"

My immediate dislike was rapidly growing stronger.

"I'm sure I shall be able to bring the garden back into shape myself," I said coolly.

"It's not only the garden, though, is it?" he persisted. "There's trees as need felling, in the wood. Elms, diseased.

So Frank Harper had been walking in Laura's private woodland. The thought made me very angry. "How do you know about the trees?"

He grinned. "Seen 'em, haven't I? Well, I walk a lot. Snare the odd rabbit here and there. It's not against the law."

"On other people's property it is," I said.

His face hardened. "Land didn't ought to be neglected. I reckoned as Miss Anderson would want somebody to keep an eye on it."

"Well, that won't be necessary any longer," I told him. "I shall be moving into Vine Cottage myself, and I'll make any necessary arrangements. As for the elms, I'll call in a firm that specializes in tree-felling. It's a skilled job."

"I told you, I was brought up to that kind of work." His voice was surly now.

"And didn't like it," I reminded him. With what I hoped was chilly politeness I added, "Thank you for the offer. Now, if you'll excuse me . . ."

I unlatched the gate, closed it firmly after me, and walked up the front path.

As I sat in the sunny kitchen, eating the simple meal I had prepared, I wondered uncomfortably whether Frank Harper was still outside, watching the house.

Washing the lunch dishes reminded me that I must get the essential services restored. I mentally blessed Laura for ensuring that the telephone had not been cut off, and phoned the electric company. They assured me that power would be restored later that afternoon. In the meantime I decided to investigate the cottage more thoroughly.

Mrs. Stockley had been right about Laura's having tidied up before she left for the nursing home. She had never been a very organized person. Books usually overflowed the shelves, her desk littered with papers, the pigeonholes of the bureau bulging with letters. It was heart-wrenching to find everything so different, so neat.

The desk itself bore the most telltale signs of change. Laura had never owned a typewriter; she wrote on lined foolscap paper with holes punched on the left-hand side for easy collation. Now, the pile of foolscap lay clean and blank in its box. Laura had been in the middle of the last of the Prince Hal books. She had been very mysterious about it, tantalizing Hugh and me with innocent delight about how she would end the saga. I knew that she had taken the manuscript with her and that she had finished it before the doctors insisted on the heavy sedation that had become necessary toward the end. The box had been returned with her other personal possessions after her death. And there it was; neatly tied with the thin white string she always insisted on using, it lay on a chair, next to the desk.

I was aching to read it. But I told myself there was plenty of time for that, and instead I sat down on the velvet-seated chair in front of the desk.

Laura had been a keen amateur photographer. There were a great many pictures of the cottage and the garden. Some were of people I could not identify, and then, with a slight shock, I came across a photograph of Simon Herington. He looked younger and happy. The picture had been taken in the garden of Vine Cottage, as he brandished a pair of shears with mock resignation.

The other set was much older and seemed to be family pictures. There was Millie, Laura's cousin, looking grim and stony-faced, even in her younger days. Some showed her with a man, probably her late husband, and there was Frank as a boy and then as a youth. Others, I surmised, might have been of the Heringtons taken long ago, for the manor house was visible in the background, and the pictures appeared to have been taken in the park. I pored over the pictures, engrossed in this almost uncanny glimpse into my old friend's youth. At last I arose and, realizing that the afternoon was nearly over, decided to take another walk to the village to pick up a few items I would need that evening and in the morning.

When I arrived at the shop I waited until Mrs. Stockley served some village children, then waited once more as the telephone began to ring at the back of the store.

When Mrs. Stockley came back she looked harassed. "Of all things!" she exclaimed. "That was Mr. Herington and, like you, he wants supplies."

"I only want a couple of items," I said. "It won't take you a minute. Then you can get on with packing the box for Mr. Herington. I suppose your husband will have to run them up to the manor?"

"That's the problem, miss," the postmaster's wife said anxiously. "Fred won't be back till late. He's gone to the wholesaler. I told Mr. Herington and he wasn't a bit pleased. He asked could I get someone else to run the things up to the manor, and I said yes. Well, I mean, I *had* to. I can't let Mr. Herington down."

It was on the tip of my tongue to offer to run the goods up to the manor myself, but after my rather unpleasant encounter with Simon Herington I was in no hurry to meet him again. I was aware that Mrs. Stockley was watching me with bright, hopeful eyes, and I felt very uncomfortable.

"What can I get for you, miss?" she asked.

I told her, and she bustled about finding the few things I needed, but I could sense that she was worrying over her problem, and in the end I spoke the words I knew she wanted to hear.

"If it's any help to you, I could drive up to the manor house. It wouldn't take me more than a couple of minutes in my car. When would you have Mr. Herington's box ready?"

The relief on Mrs. Stockley's face was reward enough. "Oh, miss, that is good of you. Are you sure it's no trouble?"

"No bother at all," I lied cheerfully. "What shall I do? Come back here in three-quarters of an hour?"

We settled on a time, and amid protestations of her everlasting gratitude I went back to Vine Cottage, already regretting my offer of help. After all, *why* couldn't Simon Herington have driven down, when he knew the difficulties? Too grand, I supposed. In America, he had probably lived with wealthy friends or in some fashionable hotel.

I collected the box of groceries at the arranged time, and turned my Fiat into the lane that wound up the manor house. The manor was approached by a long drive flanked by very old stone gateposts. Laura and I had passed them many times on our country walks, but I had never been inside them.

The drive was bordered by an avenue of poplars so tall that I was plunged into immediate shadow. After a few hundred yards, however, the trees were left behind, and I found myself following a curving road that led through an impeccably groomed parkland. The house itself stood on top of a gentle rise. It was not imposing in the grand style, but it had charm.

As I neared the curving sweep that led to the house I slowed the car, and halted outside the front door, which I approached, wondering at my sense of trepidation. I had my hand out to pull at the iron bell-handle, when I paused. Someone was playing the piano, one of Ravel's *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales*, which I knew and loved so well. I stood there entranced, waiting until the piece ended. When it did, I rang the bell and stepped back, waiting for a servant or housekeeper.

But when the door opened I found myself facing a girl in her early twenties. She was very attracive in a rather gypsy-like way; long dark hair tumbled about her shoulders. She wore a loose white blouse with a drawstring neck, and a vividly patterned dirndl skirt.

We stared at each other. My polite smile had frozen on my face; the girl's eyebrows went up. I felt foolish, but pulled myself together.

"Mr. Herington ordered some things from the village shop. There was a delivery problem, so I volunteered to run them up to the manor. And the box is heavy. Perhaps one of the servants could come and lift it out?"

She laughed. "They haven't got here yet! Simon's sudden arrival created a few problems. There's Mrs. Dunkley. She keeps house. I guess I could ask *her*."

I heard the faint overtones of an American accent. "How about Mr. Herington himself?"

"He's practicing. He has a London concert coming up."

"Then perhaps you would help me?" I suggested.

She grimaced. "Maybe I'll call Simon. Would you wait here?" The girl padded away, leaving the door open.

I stood fuming, bitterly regretting my impulsive offer to help Mrs. Stockley. I heard voices from the same room from which I had heard the piano music. Then Simon Herington appeared, frowning. He was very obviously startled to see me.

"Miss Compton! What on earth?—"

"I was in the village shop when you telephoned. Mrs. Stockley was having difficulties. I offered to bring your order up here. Perhaps you wouldn't mind getting the box out of the car. It's heavy."

"Of course," he said quickly. "But you shouldn't have troubled."

"I was trying to be helpful to Mrs. Stockley," I said with dignity. "She's a pleasant woman, and she was harassed at the thought of letting you down."

He hefted the box out of my car as though it only weighed a few ounces. Striding past me, he dumped it in the hall. Then he turned to me.

"It was good of you to come."

"I understand that your staff hasn't arrived yet?"

"No one was expecting me," he said. "It was a sudden impulse that brought me back." Rather somberly he added, "An impulse I shall very probably regret."

"You must be glad to get back to your piano," I went on rashly. "I heard you playing Ravel. I understand you're practicing for a concert."

He flinched. His answer was no answer at all. "You know the *Valses*?"

"Ravel is my favorite composer." I added, "I went to one of your concerts some years ago. You played the *Sonatine* and *Gaspard de la Nuit*. It was unbelievably exciting."

The dark eyes were studying me. "I didn't know you were interested in music, Miss Compton. You are an artist. It is seldom that a person has more than one talent."

"I can't *play* music," I said, "but that doesn't exclude me from loving it."

"Do you listen to music when you paint?"

"Very often, but once the painting or the drawing gets a real hold on me, I don't really hear it. It becomes a background. Sometimes I come to and realize a cassette has run out and clicked off. Time ceases to matter."

"I should like to see some of your paintings, Miss Compton."

"If you've read any of Laura's books, you must surely have seen them."

"The Prince Hal books?" His stare became more intense. "I hadn't connected you with those."

"You've read them?"

Suddenly his face was bleak. "Of course."

I wondered about that. His implication was that it had been inevitable for him to read them. Yet why should it be, except insofar as he had been a close friend of Laura Anderson?

"The last of the books is in the cottage," I said. "Laura finished it while she was . . . before she died. I haven't read it yet. It brings the Prince Hal saga to a conclusion."

"A happy one?"

"They were books for children," I said with some surprise at the question. "The story must have a happy ending."

"Which is where stories differ from life."

Suddenly the girl was there. She moved forward and tucked an arm through Simon's. "Aren't you going to introduce me, Simon?"

He cleared his throat. "This is Miss Compton." Turning to me he said, "I understand you've already met my cousin Cathy Bernstein? She traveled back from the States with me. She intends to spend some time in Europe. Meanwhile, she will be staying at the manor."

"Do you like the countryside?" I asked the girl.

"It's so pretty," she said enthusiastically. "And the house is adorable."

The very last word I would have chosen to describe the manor was adorable. I looked at Simon Herington, but his face was impassive.

I lost my courage then. The sight of the two of them standing there, studying me, was too much. I said a hasty good-bye and hurried back to my car.

I drove back to London the following morning. At first, riding through the countryside, stealing glances at fields and small market towns bustling with their private, enclosed life, I felt that Swaynhoe and Vine Cottage were my real home territory. But then came the inevitable transition, as the London suburbs crept up on me.

All that afternoon I worked. The light was good. The day was sunny, although the sun which filtered through to my flat was muted by London fumes. Toward four o'clock I finished the drawings and called Hugh.

"Anna! How marvelous to know you're back. How is everything?"

"I've finished the sketches, Hugh," I told him happily.

"Then bring them in, love. We'll have a session on them, and I'll buy you a drink afterward!"

"I'll drop the sketches by," I agreed, "say, in half an hour's time. But if you don't mind, I'll skip the drink. This place is in a mess. I really must play at housekeeping this evening."

There was a pause. I could sense Hugh's disappointment. After an interval he said, "How was the visit to Vine Cottage?"

"Interesting. I met Mr. Herington—Simon—and I had the dubious pleasure of encountering Millie Harper's grandson Frank."

"Then you'll have lots to tell me," Hugh said. The eagerness was back in his voice.

I realized that I didn't want to share with Hugh all the details of what had already become my second, and possibly more important, life. Yet not to do so would be unreasonable. Hugh was as closely connected with Laura Anderson as I, at least until the last of her manuscripts would be committed into book form.

Hugh had cleared his desk so that we could spread the drawings out. He came toward me with extravagantly outstretched arms.

"Here's my girl! Come along in. I've told Jean to make us some tea. She won't be long."

"You shouldn't have bothered." I laid the portfolio on his desk. "Well, here you are. Give me your verdict on these. I've brought my typescript of the book in case yours isn't available."

"I doubt if I shall need it. I know that manuscript by heart," Hugh smiled. Then he became more serious, as the editor took over from the man. "I wish Laura had agreed to those changes I wanted. The book is good, marvelously good, of course, like all the others, but I still feel it's a bit too grim."

"A great many children's stories are grim. Sad, even. Think about Hans Christian Anderson's "Little Mermaid." I remember crying for hours after I'd read that for the first time."

"All the same, I can't help thinking Laura piled on the agony a bit too much in this one. After all, it's the fifth in the series, and poor Hal is still battling his way through obstacles. He's got himself out of that nightmarish forest, and he's glimpsed his girl in the maze; but even after finding his way through *that*, he has to cross the frozen lake."

"With her on the other side of it, he's not going to give up," I pointed out.

"Agreed. But I can't help feeling the readers—and don't forget, they're children—might have been given some clue as to how he was going to manage it. Have you brought the final manuscript with you?"

"I haven't had time to read it myself yet." I saw the disappointed look on his face. "I'm sorry. I guess that's mean of me. After all, you're her publisher. But somehow—well, I don't know if I can explain it—but I want to read the book quietly, down there in Vine Cottage, where Laura wrote it."

He gave me an odd look. "Why?"

"I've said I don't know. Except I have this feeling that the Prince Hal books are in some way connected with Laura's life. I'm hoping that once I move into the cottage and soak up its atmosphere, I might begin to unravel things a bit."

"You make it sound like a mystery," Hugh complained. "Don't overromanticize, Anna. Laura Anderson was a quiet, rather solitary woman whom life—real life—had passed by. The books were an escape into dreams and imagination. To try to pin the Prince Hal saga onto her own life story is just fanciful."

He bent over to look at my drawings, and a few minutes later we were deep in the kind of technical discussion I loved. Hugh, at these moments, was admirable; his sharp editor's mind picked up details I had overlooked, found points I might have emphasized. It wasn't until Hugh's secretary appeared, with her jacket on, that I realized with a shock how the time had flown.

"It's half-past five, Mr. Lincoln. Do you mind if I go? I've left everything shipshape for tomorrow."

"Good Lord, is it that late? Yes, off you go, Jean. Good night."

Hugh sat back in his chair. "Anna, my love, I don't have to tell you that the drawings are superb, as usual. I've been wondering lately what you'll do once the Hal books are finished. You're going to miss them, aren't you?"

"It will be like having a limb chopped off," I admitted. "I'll miss them terribly. I've had a number of tempting offers recently, but there's still the final Prince Hal book to illustrate, and I don't want to cloud my concentration until that's done."

"No! No, you certainly mustn't do that!" He sounded anxious. But was his anxiety really about the illustrations, or was he concerned about the possibility of my severing contact with his firm—and with him?

He began sliding my drawings back into the portfolio. He did so in silence, and I knew that he was bothered. At last, rather plaintively, he said, "Anna, please change your mind and come for a drink with me. This past hour has been the one bright spot in a very difficult day—let's stretch it for another few minutes. Please?"

It's very hard to refuse Hugh when he speaks in that pleading voice. Those great brown eyes of his can become pools of entreaty.

I told myself firmly that it would be mean to refuse. "All right, Hugh. But only one drink. I've a hundred things to do at the apartment."

The pub he chose was very old-fashioned. It was almost empty, just a couple of elderly men sitting quietly in a corner. The bartender obviously knew Hugh and greeted him respectfully. We went to sit by the window. The street was very quiet, for we were in a backwater away from the relentless noise of traffic.

"Ah, this is good," Hugh said with satisfaction. He sat back, his beer in front of him, and regarded me with undisguised pleasure. "The perfect end to a man's working day."

"Busy executive relaxes over a pint," I joked.

"That's not quite what I meant," Hugh said.

I knew it wasn't. Why was I so bothered about it? Hugh was a charming, very attractive man. From all points of view, highly eligible. Honorable, too, which is a rare enough quality these days. Before very long he was going to ask me to marry him. He'd come near to it more than once, but for some reason I could not explain to myself I had always headed him off. Why, I wondered yet again? If I married Hugh, we should undoubtedly be happy. We had a great deal in common, and our careers would not conflict. Nor would he go philandering. It would be a satisfactory, companionable, safe marriage. Yet in my heart was the aching knowledge that I wanted more than that. Wanted a relationship that held the fire of passion. Whether I should ever find it, I could not guess. But I had to wait, at least a while longer.

I spent the rest of that week completing the drawings and watercolors that were to illustrate the fifth Prince Hal book. When I took the finished work into Hugh's office he was out, so I handed them over to Jean. At the same time I left him a note telling him I was going back to Vine Cottage later that day to settle in.

"I'll read Laura's last manuscript as soon as I possibly can. I'll start on some preliminary sketches when I know how the story works out. We can discuss these when I bring the ms. to London." All this sounded dreadfully formal, so I added, *"Don't work too hard! Will be in touch."* And added *A.* for Anna.

As I drove back along the now familiar route to Swaynhoe, I knew just how much Hugh was going to miss my constant presence in London. One way or another we had seen a great deal of each other over the past year. Possibly too much, I reflected.

I was delighted to be back at Vine Cottage; it was really beginning to seem like home as I busied myself getting the house into liveable condition. There were clean sheets to be put on the bed, windows to be opened, surfaces polished. Then, after a simple lunch, I carefully untied the string round the cardboard box containing Laura's final manuscript and took the pile of folders from it.

All I knew, as I started to read, was that by the end of this story the young prince must finally win his way through the last of the perilous adventures that had held him back for so long from the enchanting girl he had glimpsed that winter night, when the saga had begun.

As always with Laura's books, I was soon engrossed. So much so that it was some considerable time before I realized that someone was knocking on the front door. When I saw who it was I began to wish I hadn't heard the knocking at all. There stood Millie Harper, primly done out in a raincoat and hat. Her face, in the instant before she composed her expression, had been set in flinty lines. Now she contrived a bleak smile.

"Good afternoon, Miss Compton. I wonder whether I could speak to you for a moment?"

Her eyes darted past me, taking in every detail that she could see of the hall and, through the door I had left open, the sitting room.

I was in a dilemma. Laura had specifically not wanted her cousin in the place.

"Is there something I can do for you?" I asked, standing in the doorway.

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact. I don't like to ask, but it's a family thing, see."

At that moment, the first splatter of rain, driven by a gusty wind, fell from the darkening sky.

"Well, I *am* rather busy," I said, "but perhaps if you would like to come in for a few minutes, Mrs. Harper?"

Her eyes glinted with satisfaction. "Thank you."

I stepped back and she followed me into the cottage. I led her through to the sitting room, but I hated the way her eyes raked the room, as though photographing for her memory every small change I had made. I gestured to a chair opposite to where I had been sitting.

She arranged herself neatly on the chair and folded her gloved hands in her lap.

"Settling in, are you, then? I didn't think you'd want to spend much time here, you being a London lady, but I heard as you intend to live in Vine Cottage."

"Yes, I do," I said. "I moved in today as a matter of fact."

"I daresay you'll want to make a lot of changes. Bring the place up to date and all that?"

"I don't think so. I like it very well as it is." I waited for her to come to the point, but she was obviously in no hurry to do so.

"Been strange, it has, knowing Vine Cottage was standing empty all this time. Funny as both you and Mr. Herington should turn up at the same time. Real shocked, the village was, when he ran off like that."

"Ran off?"

"After poor Mrs. Herington died. Real wicked shame, that was, and her such a pretty young thing. Of course, it was all his fault, neglecting her the way he did. And then to pack his bags and fly to America! Well, it just shows what sort of a man he is."

I felt my face grow warm. I was torn between loathing for this woman's self-righteous condemnation of Simon Herington and an intense desire to know more about Julia's death. The sharp eyes were fixed on me.

"I daresay Laura will have told you all about it, though?"

"She didn't speak of it," I said. Keeping my voice neutral, I added, "I think she felt it was none of my concern, and she wasn't a gossip."

The barb went unnoticed. "Well, of course, Laura always stuck up for Mr. Simon. There was something similar about them drew them together—maybe that neither one of them fit in here. Mr. Simon was adopted, as I'm sure Laura told you." She paused, for effect, hoping, I suppose, that I didn't know. I gave her my blandest expression as she went on. "Thick as thieves they were. Well, he spent more time at Vine Cottage than he did up at the house. Of course, when Mr. Simon grew up and went away on trips, Laura didn't see so much of him, and then he married Miss Julia, and Miss Julia, she didn't like those trips one bit . . ."

I sat there helplessly while this woman nattered on. I didn't even hear half of what she was saying.

When her school days were over, Laura had gone to work in a flower shop, but then the war had come, and she had been called up.

Laura had served for two years before being wounded in an air raid and invalided from the WAAF. It was while she was convalescing, during the months she was confined to the hospital, that she had discovered a natural talent for storytelling.

And so Laura had begun her literary career, although at first she did no more than write a very occasional tale. Millie, by contrast, had married George Harper, a grocer's assistant, and the gulf between the two cousins grew steadily wider.

I was brought back to the present by Millie's utterance of a phrase so jarring that I could hardly believe she had spoken it. "And that girl he has with him now—a real flighty one she looks. Where he picked *her* up, I shouldn't like to guess! Disgraceful, I call it, moving her into the manor house. His father would soon send her packing if he knew about it. Someone ought to write and tell him."

This had become quite intolerable. "I've met Miss Bernstein—Mr. Herington's *cousin.* She seems a very charming person." I stood up. I was in no mood to let her continue with her malicious prattle.

"You said you wanted to speak to me. I can't imagine it was just to bring me up to date on the village gossip."

This time my dart pierced even Millie's thick skin. Flushing, she got up from her chair. "It was about the family photographs. Rightly they ought to come to me, being Laura's kin. I asked her about them, over and over, when she was in that there nursing home. I'm sure she meant me to have them. She wouldn't want a stranger prying into her past."

Coolly I said, "Your cousin and I were close friends, Mrs. Harper. If Laura had meant you to have her photographs, I'm sure she would have made arrangements, or let me know."

"It isn't right!" Millie flared. "They can't be of no interest to you. I've a claim to them." She seemed unreasonably agitated.

"Personally, I don't see that you have any claim at all," I said. "Laura's will was quite specific. I haven't had time to go through them, but if I find any that I think might be of interest to you, I've no objection to letting you have them. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must get back to my work."

I walked to the door and stood by it. Millie had no option but to follow me. I had made myself an enemy here. But after all, what did it matter? Laura's cousin meant nothing to me.

The rest of the afternoon I devoted to the manuscript. Laura's writing held such a wonderful magic in it. Her descriptions glowed with color; her metaphors were charmingly apt and always totally original. Truly, she had woven a spell with these books.

I was tempted to go on reading, but my head was stuffy and I felt the need for fresh air. It was twilight, the wind had dropped, and rain had long ceased to patter on the windows. I changed into a pair of stout shoes, found my jacket, and let myself out the back door.

The garden ran downhill and to a tiny stream that separated it from the meadow beyond. The field itself was not part of Laura's property, but there was a public right of way across it and, stepping carefully over the wooden plank bridging the stream, I took the path which led to the belt of woodland in which Laura and I had so often walked.

COUNTING

by Darlene Griffin

Counting the ways
I love you
is something out
of a Barrett past.

I need only
to tabulate:
the breadth of my desire
the height of my passion
the width of my wanting
the circumference of
my hope; the total
of my heart and
there you are.

Suddenly I remembered Frank Harper's remarks about the dead elms, and I went into the woods to see how bad the damage was. Mentally, I had christened the area Tanglewood, and it *was* a tangle, with beeches nudging sycamores, clumps of holly, a few interloping conifers, a sweet chestnut that every autumn cascaded its prickly fruit among the fallen leaves. There were twisting paths, clearings, and a great fallen log where Laura and I would often sit, talking.

It was toward the log that I now made my way. It was on the far side of the woods, where it adjoined the Heringtons' land and where, in winter when the trees were bare, it was possible to catch a glimpse of the manor house with its tall chimneys. Now, however, it was hidden from view behind the heavily leaved branches. I felt that I was in a private world. *My* world.

A great sense of peace descended on me. I offered up a silent thank you to Laura Anderson.

I fell into a waking daydream, my thoughts still half on the Prince Hal book. My reflections were disturbed, however, by the thud of horses' hooves somewhere beyond the woods. I got up from the log and picked a cautious path through the undergrowth to where the trees thinned. Beyond, lay pastureland and, farther still, the home park of the manor house. It was across the park that I saw the figure of a girl riding at what seemed to me a breakneck pace. The flying dark hair told me that it was Cathy Bernstein, and she was alone, riding as though the devil were after her.

For the overcast day, her jeans and checked shirt were wildly inappropriate, but she was obviously a skilled rider. A closer look revealed she was riding bareback.

On one side the pasture led, by way of a low hedge, into another field. On the other lay my stretch of woodland. I saw her tug at the horse's head in an attempt to change its course. Yet at that same instant a cock pheasant, disturbed from his peaceful foraging at the edge of the woods, uttered a piercing call of alarm and rose into flapping flight, directly in front of Cathy's horse.

The horse reared, and Cathy fought for control. The animal's eyes glazed in terror and then, swerving with a suddenness that nearly unseated Cathy, it turned straight toward the woods.

I began to panic. There was no wire fencing around the woodland, but the undergrowth at its edges was nearly impenetrable.

For an instant half a dozen things seemed to happen at once. The horse, running up against the brushwood tangle, swerved, whinnying in fright. Cathy screamed. Then the animal thudded along the edge of the wood, trying to regain its stride. The horse would have swung away again, across the pasture, if not for a low, overhanging bough in which, momentarily, it became entangled. It reared again and Cathy lost her grip. She was flung from the horse's back and fell, rolling mercifully away from the flailing hooves. A second later the horse was free, racing away across the field.

I ran to where the girl lay. She did not move, and I was sick with fright. It had been a heavy fall.

"Cathy!" I said urgently. "Cathy, are you all right?"

To my intense relief her closed eyes opened. There was no recognition in them; she just stared at me. Her face had been scraped by the bough, and a trickle of blood oozed from a graze on her cheek.

"What happened?"

"You were thrown. Your horse was startled by a bird and shied."

She hauled herself into a sitting position and began to rub a hand down the dusty legs of her jeans. She struggled to get up, and I offered a hand. "I seem to be okay," she said as she stood, but then a leg buckled and she winced. "Hell! Looks like I've done something to my ankle."

"I'd better go and get help," I said. "It's a fair distance back to the house, and you oughtn't to walk."

She forced a laugh. "I can't see what good it would be, your walking on up to the manor. They're not going to have a stretcher, are they!"

"I'm sure Mr. Herington can arrange to get help."

"Simon isn't there. He went up to London today." She smiled rather mischievously. "That's the only reason I was able to bring the gray out. He warned me not to ride her. Said she was hard to handle."

"But you wanted to prove him wrong?" I said drily.

"Sure. And I was okay, until that idiotic bird flew up out of the hedge."

"Do you usually ride bareback?"

"As often as not," she said casually. "Back home in Los Angeles it's great to ride on the beach when the tide's out. Just get up and go for miles." She tested her leg again. "This isn't too bad. Guess I can make it back to the house, if I go kind of slow."

"I'll come with you."

"You don't have to trouble."

"It's no trouble at all," I said. "I should hate to think of your collapsing halfway across the park and having to shout for help."

"That's kind of you."

"Not at all."

We began to walk. I could see at once that each step was agony for Cathy, but she just chewed on her lip and stumbled forward. I fell into place beside her. I considered offering her my arm, but some instinct told me she wouldn't like that. We weren't all that far from the house, yet I knew that for Cathy the distance must seem enormous. I glanced at her occasionally and saw how white her face was. It was a very attractive face, I realized again. I found myself wondering how attached Simon Herington was to the girl. He must have some considerable interest in her to have brought her back here with him. Perhaps they shared a love of music.

I risked the question. At least talking would keep Cathy's mind off her injured ankle. "Do you play the piano? You must know, of course, that Mr. Herington is a professional pianist?"

"I know he *was*," she said. After a pause she added, "Sure, I play. My teachers used to tell me I was pretty good. And Simon encourages me, too —at least he used to. You know he's my second cousin—my famous, musical English cousin." She laughed and went on. "My mother's such a social climber, she thinks nothing would be more terrific than to be English herself. So whenever Simon's in the States she lures him out to L.A. so she can show him off. And when I decided I wanted to do Europe this summer, Mommy twisted poor cousin Simon's arm until he graciously invited me."

"You don't have a job? You could get away, just like that?"

"I don't need a job," Cathy said carelessly. "My Daddy made his million a long time ago, only he just can't kick the work habit. So I have this allowance, and I do what I want."

"Don't you ever get bored?" I suppose it was a naive question, but I had never known anyone who didn't *have* to work.

"Bored?" Again she laughed. "Why should I be? There are a million things to do. I went to this college and studied literature for a year. And then I helped out in a photographic agency, and modeled on the side. Now, I want to see Europe, starting off with little old England."

We were at last, and thankfully, on the drive and only a hundred yards from the house, which, under the ominously darkening sky, looked faintly sinister. When we arrived I helped Cathy up the wide stone steps and was about to ring, when the door was opened by a woman. The housekeeper, I guessed: smooth hair piled into a knot on the top of her head, a little discreet makeup, and an undoubted look of command. After assessing me with one quick glance, her eyes turned to Cathy.

"Miss Bernstein, whatever has happened? Thomas told me that the horse came back without you. I was just about to send him out to look for you. Were you thrown? Are you badly hurt?"

"I've done something to my ankle." She limped past the housekeeper and made straight for a chair in the big hallway. "Is Simon back?"

"Mr. Herington telephoned some time ago. He was just leaving London." The woman glanced at the grandfather clock. "He should be arriving at any moment."

The housekeeper looked at me. "It was very kind of you to bring Miss Bernstein back. May I offer you a cup of tea, Miss Compton?"

I wondered how she knew who I was; but news travels fast in a village. I did not particularly want to appear to be intruding in Simon Herington's house, but with luck, I reflected, I could drink my tea and be gone before he arrived home.

"That's kind of you," I said to the woman.

She stepped back and I walked past

her into the hall, awed, despite myself, by its ancient, mellow charm.

"Please make yourself comfortable, Miss Compton. I'll telephone for the doctor, and then arrange to have tea brought to you."

Cathy was lying back in a chair, her foot propped on a stool. "I wish Simon would come home. I don't like it here when he's away," she brooded. "Still, if he's going to pick up that music career of his again, I guess he'll have to keep in touch with his agents."

"Has he played much since he came home?" I was curious to know.

She shook her head. "Nope, Keeps saying tomorrow, tomorrow. Seems there's something about the piano that really spooks him. I've seen him just standing there, gazing at it. I wouldn't risk talking to him at those moments, I can tell you!"

"Perhaps if *you* played, it would encourage him," I suggested.

"I thought so, too, but every time I start, he hauls me off some place, like he can't bear the sound any more."

She fell silent. The grandfather clock was ticking with ponderous slowness. A moment later I looked at Cathy and saw that her eyes were closed. She was asleep. There was no further need for me to stay. If I put my mind to it, I could walk back to Vine Cottage in twenty minutes.

But then I heard a splatter of rain on the high windows of the hall. If I walked, I'd be in for a drenching. Still, I was ready to forego the tea and begin the trek to Vine Cottage when I heard a car door slam. I went to the hallway in time to see Simon Herington bound through the door.

"Miss Compton!"

"I'm just leaving," I said. "Cathy was riding and had a fall. I brought her back. Your housekeeper is telephoning the doctor, but I don't think he will find anything worse than a sprained or twisted ankle."

"You can't walk back in this rain. If you will wait while I check on Cathy, I'll drive you."

"That really isn't necessary."

"It's the very least I can do."

It was hardly a gallant remark, but I was not eager to get soaked, and silently I followed him back to the chair where Cathy was slumped. She must have heard the car arrive. Her eyes were open.

"You've been forever, Simon! I thought you were never going to get here."

"I had business. It took longer than I expected. How are you feeling?" Bending, he ran a hand over her muddied jeans. She winced.

"Guess I've sprained my ankle. Nothing to worry about."

"You should have some hot, sweet tea," he said abruptly. "You might be suffering from shock."

"I have just prepared tea." The housekeeper had appeared quite noiselessly. "The doctor is on his way," the woman went on. "Miss Bernstein, if I may suggest it, you should put that leg up properly. I'll bring a cushion."

Cathy suffered these ministrations in silence. I took a grateful sip of tea. A glance at the windows told me it was raining harder than ever.

The door bell pealed, and the housekeeper hurried away. Simon Herington stood looking at the girl. There was a worried, baffled look on his face.

"Which horse did you take?" he asked abruptly.

"The gray."

"You know it can be mettlesome."

"I've ridden frisky horses in my time without falling off."

"Were you going fast?"

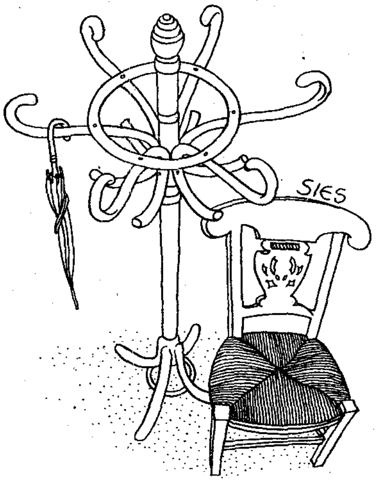
Cathy shot me a quick look. "Not so very."

"Miss Compton?" He seemed to be challenging me.

"I didn't see very much," I said carefully. "Only when the pheasant flew up and the horse shied."

"Hmm." I had the feeling that he didn't believe a word either of us had said.

Then the doctor came into the hall. He had the cheery manner of his kind, and there was a good deal of, "Well, young lady, and what have you been up to, eh?" Simon Herington suggested that he and I leave the doctor to his examination. I was glad to do so, although the prospect of his company made me oddly nervous.



Simon led me into an elegant dining room, and again I marveled at the sheer beauty of this place. He went and stood by the mullioned windows, looking out at the rain falling heavily from a leaden sky. Turning, he said, "My cousin can be reckless when she gets on a horse. The gray, in particular, has not been very well schooled."

"She was doing well enough, until the animal was startled by that pheasant. Of course, without a saddle—" I could have bitten my tongue out. I hadn't meant to give away the fact that she had been riding bareback.

"So that's how it was!" Simon Herington said. "I've warned her before, but she can be very willful."

"She's young," I said.

His mouth twitched slightly. "You, Miss Compton, being positively aged!"

"Well, I have the advantage of her by several years, I should think."

He considered me gravely from dark eyes. "A few, perhaps."

There was a hesitant tap, and the doctor appeared in the doorway. "I've made an examination, Mr. Herington, and there's nothing to worry about; it's just a minor sprain. A couple of days off her feet, and the young lady will be as good as new. I suggest that Miss Bernstein go and lie down for an hour. There might be some delayed shock, though to judge from her determination, I rather doubt it. In any case, I'll look in and see her again tomorrow."

"That's very kind of you."

"Not at all!" Then, the doctor added briskly, "Now, if you will excuse me, I have some other calls to make. Your housekeeper was lucky to find me in."

The housekeeper had appeared, silently, as usual. "I will show you out, Doctor."

He seemed startled by the speed with which she had come back. "Is Miss Bernstein lying down?"

"She refused to go to bed. We achieved a compromise—she is lying on a sofa with a coverlet over her, watching television."

I tried to restrain a smile. Simon Herington had certainly introduced a troublesome guest into his household. When the doctor had gone, Simon turned to me. He made no comment about Cathy's intransigence.

"I'll run you home, Miss Compton. You really can't walk in this weather."

"Don't you want to check on Cathy first?"

"Mrs. Dunkley is quite capable," was his only reply as he led me out the door to his car.

After a few moments, during which he negotiated the sweep of the drive, he said quietly, "Miss Compton, I daresay you will have learned a great deal about Cathy Bernstein during the time you were together. She is, to say the least, talkative. Do you think I was wrong to allow her to come to England with me?"

The question startled me. "I should guess Cathy is over twenty-one and entitled to make her own decisions."

"Yes, but to have brought her to the manor gives me certain responsibilities. I'm already beginning to wonder if I was mistaken in taking them on."

"You have responsibilities as her host, of course," I agreed. "If you're thinking of things like today's accident, well, that could have happened to anyone, anywhere."

"No, it's just that—well, I had envisaged her hiring a car, making the customary visits to Stratford, Windsor, and so on."

"Instead of which you find that she's rather too dependent upon you for company?"

He shot me a quick glance, then adjusted the windshield wipers to a faster rate against the driving rain.

"I hadn't known about Laura's death, for a start. I came back expecting to find Laura in Vine Cottage, as she had always been. I had hoped that Laura might have a steadying influence on Cathy. Cathy's mother is a frenetic woman, Miss Compton, very egotistical and shallow. Laura, on the other hand, was the least self-centered person I ever met."

I hesitated before answering. "I think Laura might have been rather out of her depth with Cathy."

"Meaning that she was unworldly? Less so than you might think, Miss Compton. As Laura's friend, I should have expected you to know that."

"She did not speak much about her past."

"But you have inherited her home and all her possessions."

"Am I to understand that this bothers you?"

"All I can hope is that you are loyal and discreet, as Laura was."

Now *I* was out of my depth.

"I should certainly feel happier," Simon went on, "if she had destroyed all references to the past."

"But why?"

"Your question suggests that you have not yet gone through such papers and records as she left behind."

"I've hardly had a chance even to settle in," I pointed out. "My first task—and a very pleasant one—will be to read the final Prince Hal manuscript."

"You haven't yet done so, then?"

"I started, but I was interrupted by a visit from Millie Harper."

His face darkened. "That woman! You must avoid her at all costs, Miss Compton. She is a mischief-maker of the worst kind. So, for that matter, is her grandson Frank."

I had already formed my own conclusions about Millie Harper and her grandson. All the same, it was irritating to be given such a peremptory order by Simon Herington. Rather stiffly I said, "Millie wanted some old family photographs."

"You didn't give her any?" The question came quickly.

"I promised her any that might be relevant to her family—more as a way of getting rid of her than anything else."

"I'm sorry. I have been impertinent. Already you have shown kindness both to Cathy and to me that we had no right to expect. Please forgive me. It's just that on the subject of the past—Laura's as well as my own—I am very sensitive."

Laura's? What could there be in Laura Anderson's past that would cause Simon Herington concern?

Just then the cottage came into view. To my dismay I saw Hugh Lincoln's car parked outside it.

"You appear to have a visitor," Simon remarked. "Were you expecting someone?"

"I certainly wasn't expecting to see this particular person." Exasperation boiled up inside me.

He slowed the Bentley just behind Hugh's car. I saw Hugh peer out of the rain-spattered windows, and then he was out and coming to meet me.

"Anna, where on earth have you been? I seem to have been sitting her for hours."

Simon, from courtesy, had gotten out of his car. I stumbled over the introductions. Simon Herington's face was like stone. Hugh, on the other hand, was beaming.

"So you are one of the famous Heringtons. Laura so often talked about your family." He turned to me. "Anna, I just couldn't wait to get my hands on the Prince Hal manuscript. Have you finished it? Can you spare it?"

We were all getting steadily wetter. "Why don't you both come in out of the rain?" I said, awkwardly. I expected Simon Herington to refuse, but to my astonishment he stalked up the path behind Hugh and me.

"Would either of you like a cup of coffee?" I asked.

"No, thank you," came Simon's answer.

But Hugh accepted, and I went in to put the kettle on. I heard sporadic conversation, and when I came back with the coffee, I found Hugh stretched on the sofa, while Simon stood by the fireplace, obviously ill at ease.

"Anna, I can't say how absolutely *right* you look here! Completely at home. Almost as if you'd been born here."

It was an incredibly tactless remark, and I couldn't think of any answer at all. I could sense with every nerve in my body how violently Simon Herington resented Hugh's sprawling pose on the sofa. I couldn't blame him.

I managed to say to Simon, "Thank you for bringing me home. I hope Cathy recovers quickly."

"If Cathy decides she is unwell, she will play the invalid for a week and have my staff dancing attendance on her. If, as is more likely, she chooses to shrug the matter off, she will probably be back on that wretched horse tomorrow."

Hugh's eyes were bright with interest. "Has someone had an accident?"

"A house guest of mine," Simon said tersely.

"She sounds like a lady of great character." Hugh smiled.

"You could express it in those terms."

I rushed into the awkward silence that followed. "It goes without saying, Mr. Herington, that if Cathy would enjoy it, I could take her round and about occasionally. I have a car." I added ruefully, "Not that I'm in any way a substitute for Laura!"

Momentarily Simon's cold mask broke, and I saw a warmth in his face I had not seen before.

"That's extremely generous of you, Miss Compton, but you have work to do. If I bring a young visitor to this country and she isn't prepared to entertain herself, then I'm the one who must do something about it."

"If she's at a loose end, I would be happy to give her a guided tour of London," Hugh rattled on cheerfully. "Show her a few museums and churches."

"I'm sure you must be as busy as Miss Compton." I could feel a restrained anger simmering in Simon Herington.

"I would certainly like to meet the lady while she is staying with you," Hugh said in his most engaging manner.

"Hugh, what on earth are you talking about?" I exploded. "It's evening already. You'll have to start back to London within an hour or two."

"Ah, that was to be my little surprise!" Hugh said, smiling warmly at me. "I don't have to be in the office tomorrow. That's why it seemed such a heaven-sent chance to come down and have a look at Laura's manuscript."

I could see Simon freeze. As for me, I know my face went red. "And just where do you propose to stay? This area isn't exactly full of four-star hotels."

"I'm sure I shan't find any problem in getting a bed," Hugh said blandly.

Simon Herington made a sudden, almost violent move toward the door. "I must go. Thank you again, Miss Compton, for your help. Good night, Mr. Lincoln."

"Night, old chap," was Hugh's reply.

Simon positively crashed the door behind him. One of Laura's vases rattled on the mantel. I swung round on Hugh.

"How *could* you? I've never been so embarrassed!"

His eyes widened innocently. "How could I what?"

"Oh... everything. Try and get yourself up to the manor. Push yourself into Cathy Bernstein's life. And—and—"

"Well?" the brown eyes were very intent now.

"Give Simon the impression you would be spending the night here! It was idiotic of you to come dashing down here so soon. I haven't even had a chance to settle in properly, let alone read the book. I started to, but since then there's been one interruption after another."

"Of which I am the most intolerable!" he said abjectly. "I'm sorry. It *was* inconsiderate, but I'm impatient about the book. You know that. Don't forget, Laura wanted me to have all her papers. I had to come sometime to sort through them."

"You're not planning to do that on *this* visit? It will take days just to pack them up."

"In that case I shall have to stay for a few days. The office won't grind to a halt without me. A few days of country air will do me good. *You* look positively fantastic, Anna, as I've already said."

"You've said far too much, one way and another." I found suddenly that I was shaking and that my voice was unsteady.

Instantly Hugh was on his feet. He came to where I was standing and put an arm round my shoulders in the old familiar way.

"Anna, love, what's the matter? Are you cross with me for needling Herington? I couldn't help it. He got my back up. I don't know why." He paused to consider it. "I suppose because he so obviously resented my being here. Yet why should he?"

"He didn't even know Laura was dead until two weeks ago!" Suddenly I was crying. "It's been a big enough shock for him to adjust to my having taken over the cottage. To find you sitting here so snugly must have rubbed salt into the wound!"

"Aren't you being melodramatic?" He looked at me quizzically. "Really, Anna, you intrigue me. Why should the mysterious Mr. Herington care one way or another about who sits on this couch. It isn't as if he was terribly close to Laura."

I wasn't sure myself why I had reacted so strongly, but I had no desire to discuss it with Hugh and decided to let it drop. Hugh then persuaded me to come out to dinner with him and I went upstairs to change.

When I awoke the next morning the day was already warm enough to make the prospect of working outside pleasantly inviting. After breakfast I tucked Laura's precious manuscript under my arm and went into the garden. The oak bench was too wet to sit on, after last night's rain, but there were deckchairs and a small table in the shed, so I set myself up comfortably, leaving the back door open so that I could hear Hugh when he knocked.

He had been lucky in finding a room at a nearby inn. I expected him to arrive by mid-morning and wanted to get in as much work as possible before then.

Within minutes, all the irritations of the day before fell away. I found myself turning the pages with ever-increasing speed, anxious to learn how Prince Hal would finally win the girl of his dreams. Before I had got very far I heard Hugh's knock.

When I went to let him in I found him clutching a great bunch of rosebuds. Smiling sheepishly, he held them out to me. "By way of apology," he said, "for my intrusion upon your peace, my dear Anna. For making you uncomfortable in front of your Mr. Herington. For any number of reasons." Then that warm smile quirked at his mouth. "Also because it is a gentleman's privilege to bring flowers to a lovely lady!"

"Oh, Hugh, you are absurd. But thank you, they're beautiful." As he followed me into the cottage I added, as an afterthought, "And he's by no means *my* Mr. Herington. Quite the reverse. I suspect he very much resents me."

"That's not the impression I got."

"Oh?" I stared at Hugh. He had antennae as delicate as a butterfly's.

"Respect. Perhaps a shade of fear." Hugh resumed his former seat on the sofa and gave me his bright-eyed glance.

"Fear?" I said incredulously.

"Don't ask me to explain it, but I certainly felt it."

"Well, let's not waste time talking about Simon Herington's frame of mind," I said, anxious to change the subject. "There's work to be done. By both of us."

Ten minutes later I left Hugh on his knees beside the chest full of manuscripts, his coffee on a table beside him, and went back into the garden.

I realized that the final chapter was to bring the story to no ordinary climax. The idyllic mood in which Hal set off on the last leg of his journey was abruptly shattered by a dark and menacing cloud in the otherwise brilliant sky. At first Hal took no heed of it, telling himself that a summer storm was brewing. He was even more elated when, from the now visible cluster of small houses ahead, he saw running toward him the girl he had pursued for so long and who had seemed so unattainable.

Hastily I turned the page. I wasn't at the end yet. What was going to happen? With a sick heart I read how the menacing cloud opened; how what Laura called "the black bird of death," swooped at Hal, dashing him to the ground with one evil blow from its wings. Hal, stunned, lay there for a moment, then picked himself up and began to run toward his girl. But the bird came at him again. This time he saved himself by taking shelter under a nearby bush. Thwarted and angry, the bird rose and circled, preparing to attack again.

"But suddenly, from the village, all the people came running." Laura's writing was growing ever more indecipherable. *"In their hands they held sticks and stones. Sweeping the girl along with them, they ran to where the young prince lay. They formed a circle about him and raised their weapons, ready to defend him. This time, as the bird flew low, it screeched with fury as a hail of stones thudded against its side. There was a cracking sound and then, suddenly, a silence. The evil bird rose uncertainly into the air and flew unsteadily for some distance. The villagers watched in silence. The girl, cradling the young prince's head in her lap, cried softly, but he caught her hand and held it.*

"Then the black bird was trying to rise, but with its broken wing it could not do so. Even at such a great distance its final howl of rage could be heard as it was dashed to pieces.

"'The bird is dead,' whispered the villagers. But Hal knew it had been no real bird. An evil spirit, a spirit that had haunted his

lady all her life but would never trouble her again."

"Hal rose to his feet and put his arm about his lady's shoulders. 'My lady of the moonlight, we have faced many dangers and overcome them. Now we are safe. Our happiness may at last begin, and I know that it will never end.'"

I sat there for a long time, staring at the final paragraph. At last I put the page on top of the others, and carefully placed the whole manuscript back in its folder. Then I walked down the garden towards the little stream, the bridge, and the Tanglewood that lay beyond. I needed time to think.

The sun, nearing its zenith, had blazed down on the garden, but in the woods it was cool and shady, the brilliance of the day filtered by a canopy of leaves.

Yet *I* was disturbed. Those final pages were almost horrific in their violence.

Suddenly, I realized that I was not alone. I had heard nothing, but I caught the scent of cigarette smoke. At first I could see no one but then, in a small glade about fifty yards farther ahead, I saw a man sitting, legs sprawled in front of him, his back propped against a tree.

With a sense of outrage I recognized Frank Harper. He had been watching me. He grinned and raised a hand in careless salute, although he did not get up.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him. "This is private property."

"Ah, yours now, Miss Compton! How does it feel to be a landowner?" he said, with a maddeningly insolent grin. He drew on his cigarette, then carelessly stubbed it out among the undergrowth.

"Put that cigarette out properly," I said in a sharp voice. "Do you want to start a fire?" His blue eyes narrowed, but he crushed the cigarette more firmly. "I asked what you were doing here."

He stood up, dusting off the seat of his jeans. "Thought as I'd better check on the elms, after last night's winds. Told you they was dangerous, didn't I? Look at that one! Reckon it's going to fall pretty soon. Ought to be felled."

Frank Harper was right; it would have to come down. Felling it would not be easy, for it was ringed about with other trees. I bit my lip.

"Want me to get it done for you? I know a chap as could come and see to it."

"No, thank you. I'm quite capable of arranging the matter myself. And now will you please get off my land?"

"What's the hurry?" he asked insolently. "I'm not doing any harm. Walked here often enough, I have, in the past."

Suddenly I heard a second man's voice, coldly angry, say, "Miss Compton has told you to get off her land, and stay off it, Harper. So clear off. If I hear any more complaints about you, I'll have you hounded out of the district!"

Turning, I saw Simon Herington standing behind me. Frank Harper's grin had disappeared.

"I wasn't doing no harm!"

"The point is, you're not welcome here. So get out, and don't show your face on Miss Compton's property again."

As Frank Harper slouched away, I said rather shakily, "Thanks very much. That man gives me the creeps. I found him outside the cottage the very first time I came down here, and he's been lurking about ever since."

Simon Herington's jaw muscles tightened. "He's a born troublemaker. I should have had him run out of the district years ago."

"Could you have?" I was intrigued.

"Yes," was his brief answer. Then, from somewhere, he produced a wry smile. "I, too, am trespassing on your land, Miss Compton. I can only plead long habit. I used to come this way when I visited Laura. I must break myself of the habit."

"There's no need," I said hastily. "You're more than welcome to walk here. Or anywhere else, for that matter."

"I've always liked these little woods," Simon said, "even in winter, when it's bare and still. I don't know what the fascination is. God knows I've woods enough of my own. Perhaps it's just that those are so big, and therefore rather anonymous. This one has a character of its own."

Something in his words rang a bell in my memory. I stood thinking. "Do you suppose this was the place Laura was writing about in the Prince Hal books? One of the perilous places the young prince has to negotiate is a dark wood. I hadn't supposed Laura could mean this one, because to me it has always seemed so friendly. But I suppose it's possible."

He turned away from me and fingered the shoots of a young tree. Finally, and rather stiffly, he said, "Laura had a very fertile imagination. I'm sure you would be wrong to associate any particular place or event with her fiction."

I felt that I was being warned off the subject, and I found myself wondering why.

Then, unexpectedly, Simon said, "It's well after noon, Miss Compton. I've been out most of the morning. I'm just on my way back to the house. Would you care to join me there for a glass of sherry?"

The invitation staggered me. I pulled myself together, hoping my expression hadn't given me away. "I'd like that very much. Thank you."

For a time we walked in silence. Then I asked him how Cathy Bernstein was.

He shrugged. "She was still asleep when I left the house. But that is not unusual. She keeps late hours and seldom appears until mid-morning.

"Cathy, like so many of the young, is obsessed with herself. She seems to think that every minor incident in her life—childhood tantrums, neglects, and dreams—has some deep significance."

"To a certain extent she's right," I said. "We're all shaped by our pasts."

"Shaped, perhaps, but that's not to say we should brood continually on the past, is it? To be dominated by it?"

"I agree that we should accept what has made us the way we are, and that if it's not a very pleasing result, we should try to do something about it. I also believe in looking forward rather than back."

"Words of wisdom that bely your years, Miss Compton!"

We relapsed into silence until we reached the house.

The sherry was excellent and I was relieved to find that Simon could be a charming and entertaining man when he put himself to the task.

He recounted a great many amusing anecdotes about incidents that had occurred during his concerts, and then, after a time, he began to talk about his family. His uncle Henry, he told me, had been slated to take over the management of the estate but had been killed in the last days of the war. "My uncle flew bombers. I suppose he was lucky to have survived as long as he did, when one realizes how many young men died. And women. I've always assumed that my natural parents were killed in the war." Abruptly he said, "Martin, my adoptive father, was forced to take on the responsibility for the estate after the war. There was no alternative, at least until I came of age."

"But your heart is in music, too?"

"It was," he said. "For a time I was able to combine the two activities, with the help of an able estate manager. But now I may let things go on as they are."

He looked at my glass. "May I offer you some more sherry, Miss Compton?"

I shook my head. "I really ought to be going. I'm afraid I've abandoned Hugh."

"Oh yes, Mr. Lincoln." The voice was chilly. "I hope you were able to accommodate him without discomfort."

I felt the color rush into my face. Stiffly I said, "We went out for dinner. We found a very pleasant place called The Hunting Lodge. It's a converted coaching inn about five miles from here. I daresay you know it. They were able to offer Hugh a room for a few nights."

"You won't want to walk all the way back to the cottage, Miss Compton, and I very much regret that I have a business appointment in a short time. Perhaps you would care to telephone Mr. Lincoln and have him come and pick you up?"

The last thing I wanted was for Hugh to arrive at the manor. He would be too much like an eager dog, savoring every new scent. No, that was unfair, I reprimanded myself. Hugh had a genuine love of beautiful things and places, and certainly the manor was a gem. All the same, I suspected that his presence would not please Simon Herington.

"I shall walk back," I said firmly. "Hugh is probably so engrossed that he wouldn't even hear the telephone."

Simon Herington's dark eyebrows went up disbelievingly. He said, "Well, if that is your wish. But first, perhaps you would be interested to see the house."

For the second time that morning I had to hide astonishment. Yet again I was pleased. "Can you spare the time?"

"I shall make it," was the grave reply, and he put his glass down on the table. "However, since you will want to look at things with a painter's eye, Miss Compton, I shall spare you a detailed description of every treasure."

He smiled, and again I realized how much his face changed when he allowed that lurking humor to break through. The man was far too controlled, I reflected. He held himself on too tight a leash. Was it necessary, after all this time? But I had no opportunity to brood on the question. We went up the wide staircase, which was lighted by mullioned windows, and at the top I found myself standing in a gallery, the walls of which were lined with portraits, some of them obviously many hundreds of years old.

"Those are the Herington ancestors!"

"That is my father, Martin," Simon went on, "and next to him, my mother. Alongside, hangs the portrait of my Uncle Henry. I never knew him, of course; he was killed before I was born. And yet, somehow, I feel I know him very well, for I was brought up on tales of his legendary escapades, which ranged from trying to climb up the outside of the house by way of the jutting cornices and gables, to contravening a strict order, one bitter January, against skating on the lake. Needless to say, the ice in the center was not sufficiently solid to bear his weight, and he very nearly drowned."

Rather wistfully Simon added, "I wish I had known him. He was obviously a man of immense courage. My father, on the other hand, was quiet and studious."

I looked at the painting of Simon's father, Martin Herington. The face was pale, the eyes dark and introspective. There was the aquiline Herington nose, distinguishable in all the portraits. Simon seemed to have the same, almost delicate, portrait, so unexpected on his strong, masculine face. Simon's mother was a sweet-faced woman, not really beautiful, but displaying a shy charm which I found attractive. Then I studied the portrait of Henry, the young man who had been killed in the war. The painting must have been done soon after the start of it, for Henry was in his RAF uniform. He wore it with a kind of careless pride, which touched me more than I cared to admit. There was no hint in the laughing face of any anxiety, no indication that he knew his days might be numbered. His uniform cap was tucked under his arm. His head was bare, revealing a rather unruly mop of fair hair; his eyes were the clearest green I had ever seen. There was a charisma about the young man which held me rooted to the spot.

In fact, I stood for so long that Simon Herington grew impatient. "Shall we move on?"

But at that moment the door bell jangled down below in the hall. Looking over the gallery rail I saw Mrs. Dunkley go to open the door. Then there was the unmistakable, excited voice of Cathy Bernstein and, to my confusion, the deeper tones of Hugh Lincoln.

As we reached the hall, I heard Hugh's easy, half apologetic explanation.

"There I was, abandoned by Anna, not even knowing where she was, when Cathy appeared at the door. I could hardly believe my luck. What more pleasant surprise than to find Miss Bernstein on the doorstep!"

"Why were you out, Cathy? The doctor told you to rest," Simon said with exasperation.

She tossed her head, sending that mane of dark hair rippling about her shoulders. "I lay in bed until I was bored, and then I went walking. The ankle is fine," she added hastily. "I strapped it, to be on the safe side, but it didn't give me any trouble. I thought I might visit Miss Compton, and imagine my surprise when I was greeted by a handsome stranger!" She laughed.

"I've brought her back in my car," Hugh said. "A walk is all very well, but I didn't want Cathy to overdo things."

It hadn't taken them long to get on first name terms, I reflected. But Hugh has an easy way with him, and Americans are great believers in instant friendship.

"It was kind of you to bring Cathy home," Simon said formally. "I'm sorry you were inconvenienced. If she had telephoned, I would have sent a car round for her."

"Oh, we had fun," Cathy protested. "Hugh and I found the cutest little country inn, and we drank English beer and chatted with the local folk."

Her eyes were sparkling, her face animated. It struck me that Simon Herington was totally the wrong person to be in charge of this young woman. Cathy needed fun, enjoyment, laughter. I suspected there was very little laughter to be heard in the manor house.

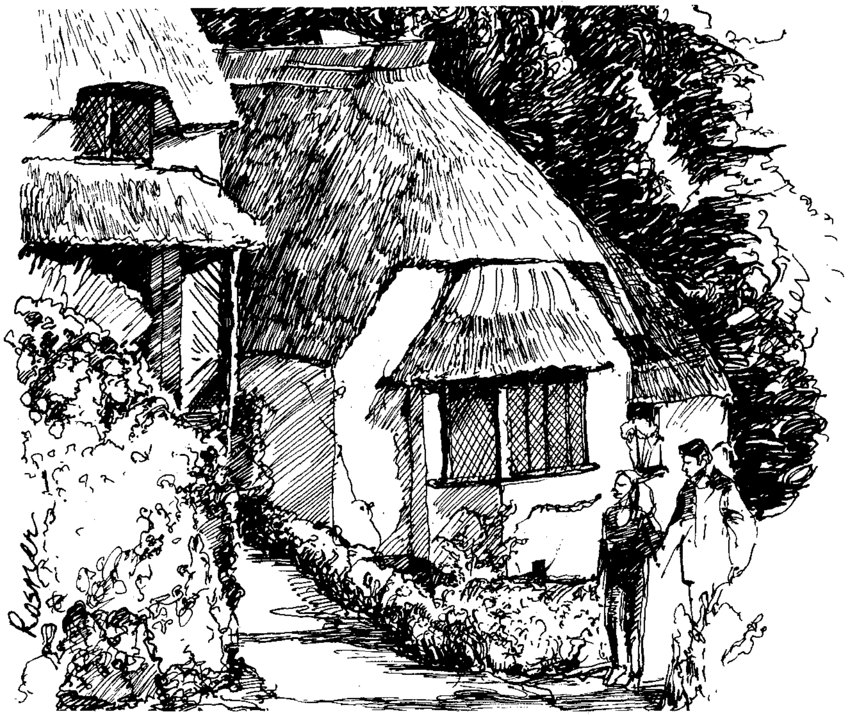
Simon was politely offering Hugh Lincoln a drink, but Hugh, although obviously agog to stay in the house, was tactful enough to refuse.

"Well, since you've so fortuitously arrived, Hugh, you can give me a lift back," I said lightly. "I was planning to walk."

"We'll find somewhere to have lunch on the way," Hugh said.

I thought I saw Simon frown, but I may have been wrong. "Well, as long as it's simple and quick," I said. "I've work to do, Hugh, and so have you."

"I've made some fascinating discoveries this morning," Hugh said, his eyes lighting up. "There are quite enough short stories to make a pleasant little book. Even more interesting are the poems. I had no idea Laura ever wrote poetry."



I stared at him. "Nor had I. Are they children's verse?"

He shook his head. "By no means. They're love poems, and quite unlike anything else of Laura's that I've ever read."

I felt suddenly uncomfortable, though I could not account for it.

"You're not thinking of publishing those, I hope?" It was Simon Herington who spoke, and his voice was sharp.

Hugh stared. Then, almost too casually I thought, he said, "I really haven't considered it yet. One or two might go well in an anthology of verse."

"I doubt very much if they were meant for publication." Once again I was aware of suppressed anger in Simon Herington.

"Have you any reason for saying that?"

Abruptly Simon turned away. "No reason at all."

But I felt certain that he was not telling the truth, and I wondered why.

When we returned to Vine Cottage after lunch, I gave Hugh the Prince Hal manuscript to read. He seized on it eagerly.

"What did you think of it, Anna?"

"Before giving you my opinion, I'd rather you read it first."

He looked alarmed. "It's all right, isn't it? I know Laura was ill when she finished it. Is it below the standard of the other books?"

I shook my head. "No, it can't be faulted in any way. But—well, there's something rather curious about it. As I say, I would prefer you read it before I say what's on my mind."

"I'll start now," Hugh said promptly. "In fact, I think I'll take a leaf out of your book and take myself off into the garden. Might as well soak up some sun before I go back to London."

"How long will you be staying down here?"

"As long as I can," he said.

I wondered whether Cathy Bernstein had reinforced his sudden interest in the country. "Off you go then, Hugh. You'll find a chair and a table outside. I'll bring some tea later. I'm going to tackle the photographs."

When he had gone off into the garden, I sat down at the desk. I felt vaguely uneasy, although I could not have said why. The first and most obvious thing to do was to clear the surface. I had left it littered with the papers. A muddled surface may look utterly chaotic to a casual observer, but to the person who has created the muddle, there is always a certain kind of logic in it. So it was with me. Manuscript pages had been on the left of the desk, while my own notes about possible ideas for sketches, on loose sheets taken from a binder, had been at the other side.

I distinctly remembered how one rubber-banded collection of photographs had stuck out at an angle from a certain pigeonhole. Now, they were squared up.

A cold chill began to settle on me. I looked round the room. The furniture was all as it had been. I went across to the chest that Hugh had so triumphantly called a treasure trove. Hugh is by nature an orderly man. He would not have left Laura's chest of manuscripts in this mess.

Someone had been here. But who? And how on earth had they got into the cottage? I never went out without locking the door. A thought occurred to me, and I went through to the kitchen. I sighed with exasperation. Because the day was so hot I had left the window wide open. Anyone of even reasonable agility could have climbed onto the wooden bench that stood outside, and clambered through.

Who? I asked myself again. And for heaven's sake, why? Certainly no ordinary burglar. Everything of any obvious value was still there.

I remembered Millie Harper's almost frantic insistence that the family photographs Laura had taken should be given to her. Frank Harper! He must have been the intruder.

I told myself to put the whole thing out of my mind and set to my task.

It was, in a sense, like seeing a film of Laura's life. As a small girl she had been thin and awkward, with a habit of turning her face shyly from the camera, but gradually, as the years passed, she acquired poise. As often as not, in those girlhood days, she had been photographed with her cousin Millie, and the difference between the two girls was striking. Millie stared boldly into the camera lens with a smirk on her face.

As I went on throught the pile, I came upon the first picture of Laura in her WAAF uniform. Her face was grave, as though she took her new role very seriously.

There was a shot of Laura sitting in a chair in the garden, apparently taken after her long sojourn in the hospital.

Then there was a gap of several years. The next picture was one of those that used to be taken by street photographers. It showed her just outside a flower shop, and I guessed that she had kept it because, after the war, she had become the manager of the shop and was proud of her responsibility.

Around 1947, the photographs more or less died out. There was one of her cousin Millie's wedding, at which Laura had been a bridesmaid. Then I came on another batch. At first I could not identify the young boy who grinned into the camera lens, but after a moment I realized with a shock that it was Simon Herington. With a curious sense of unreality I saw him grow from a lanky boy into a good-looking youth, and then into a serious-faced young man. One, which I found curiously touching, must have been taken only a few years previously. Perhaps Laura's camera had a self-timing device, for it had been set to take both Simon and Laura. They were toasting each other with what appeared to be glasses of champagne. Very conspicuous on the table beside them was a copy of one of her books, propped against a vase of flowers. I guessed it had been a publication-day celebration. She was laughing and happy. Simon, too, looked more carefree than I would have believed possible. I stared at his face for a long time.

With a sigh, I put the photographs into chronological order, taking out a few of Laura with her cousin. If Millie bothered me again, I could give these to her.

I became aware that Hugh was standing in the doorway. He was blinking, momentarily dazed after coming in from the sunshine of the garden. "You promised me tea," he said in mock dejection.

"Hugh, I'm sorry! I was lost to the world." I got up and went through to the kitchen. "I've been going through all Laura's old photographs.

"Did you learn anything new from the photographs?"

"Did you expect me to?" I parried.

"You've said more than once that you felt she must have had a reason for leaving them here."

"If there's a reason, I haven't found it," I admitted.

"And you've been through everything?"

"No, not yet."

"Then there's still time," he observed.

"Time for what?"

"To unravel the mystery you seem determined to believe exists," he said, flashing his most innocent smile.

"Now you're making fun of me." I was rather annoyed.

"By no means. As a matter of fact, I've discovered a small mystery myself." He drank thirstily at the tea I had put in front of him.

I sat across the table from him. "Oh?"

"Those poems. I mentioned them when I was at the manor, remember? Herington shut me up pretty promptly."

"And rightly so, I thought. If Laura chose to write love poetry, it was certainly not intended for publication. In any case, the poems must be very old. I daresay they were the result of some youthful love affair."

"Precisely," Hugh said. "But you see, Laura didn't write those poems."

"What on earth are you saying?"

He put down his cup and faced me, his lively brown eyes very intent. "They're handwritten, but not by Laura. If there's one thing I shall never make a mistake about, it's Laura's handwriting. In any case, at the top of each one was written, 'To L.'" Hugh sat back, watching my expression.

When I lifted my teacup, I found that my hand was unsteady. "Were they signed?"

Hugh shook his head. "I told you it was a mystery. There's no clue as to the author. And this attachment was serious, Anna. I'm convinced of it. I know it's none of my business, but I'd give anything to know who it was she fell in love with all those years ago, and what happened."

"Where are the poems now?"

"With the rest of the stuff I was looking at. "Come and see."

I followed him through to the other room. He lifted the handkerchief-wrapped package and unwrapped it. Gently he sifted through the sheets inside, which were neatly folded, and then took out a single, flimsy piece of blue paper. He held it out to me.

Some terrible fascination forced my eyes toward the lines written on the paper. It was not very good poetry, but the words blazed with the intense anguish of a man who had met, loved, and was afraid of losing a woman who meant everything to him.

"About the book," Hugh was saying. "I've finished it. Only a quick first read, but I'm tremendously impressed. It's a marvelous culmination to the adventures. It will give you enormous scope, Anna. There are at least four episodes that simply shriek out for illustration, particularly the last one, where the bird attacks our Hal."

"I wanted to talk to you about that." I sat down. "Did anything strike you about that particular episode?"

"It's just about the most dramatic climax Laura could have dreamed up! There are the young lovers on the verge of happy-ever-after, and then this final bolt from the blue. Or should I say from the black? You'll have a great time with that cloud!" He chuckled.

"Isn't the whole episode a bit too much?" Seeing his eyebrows go up, I added, "It's pretty terrifying. It's almost as though Laura hadn't intended the story to have a happy ending at all."

◆

For what is knowledge duly weighed?
Knowledge is strong, but love is sweet;
Yea all the progress he had made
Was but to learn that all is small
Save love, for love is all in all.

Christina Rosetti
The Convent Threshold

"What do you mean?" He was staring at me.

"It sounds an odd thing to say, but I believe Laura would rather have ended the book a different way, with the prince destroyed and his hopes shattered."

"For heaven's sake!" Hugh said. "Laura was writing for children. Her tale had to have a happy ending. She knew that. She was utterly professional." He looked at his watch. "Anna, I must go. I want to get back and change. I feel hot and sticky after my afternoon in the sun."

"I've invited Cathy out for a meal. I thought the change might do her good. She's getting a bit broody, I suspect. I can't imagine Herington comes up with a fund of light chatter over meals! Perhaps you'd like to join us."

"No, thanks. I've things to do."

"You're not going to browse through those old papers all evening, are you? Why don't you make a few tentative sketches for the new book? Then we could discuss them tomorrow."

"I just might."

"Are you sure you don't mind my taking Cathy out?" He sounded anxious.

"Of course not," I said, and smiled to reassure him.

Hugh picked up the manuscript. "In that case I'll take this with me. You won't want it tonight, will you?"

"No. I shan't need it for a while."

"Then I'll give it a second reading." Hugh came across and kissed me lightly on the cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow. And promise me you won't sit here brooding about Laura."

"I'll try not to." But I knew it wouldn't be easy.

When finally I fell asleep that night, it was to dream vividly about a great black bird. Only it was not hovering over some idyllic pasture and threatening a fictional prince; it was sitting in the dead elm in my bit of woodland, flapping its wings in slow motion and staring beadily, hungrily down at me. I thought I heard it give a shrill cry, and then I woke, sweating, to hear the telephone ringing downstairs. As I grabbed my dressing gown I saw, from my bedside clock, that it was nearly nine. I ran barefoot down the stairs.

"Good morning, Anna!" Hugh sounded bright and brisk. "I hope I didn't disturb you. I've just had a telephone call from my secretary. There's a panic in the office. I'll have to go back right away. It's infuriating.

After a few pleasantries, he hung up. I went to see what I needed. I decided the village shop would supply the essentials.

While I was waiting at the counter for Mrs. Stockley, the shop door bell jangled and a woman came in. With a sinking of the heart I recognized Millie Harper.

"Good morning, miss." Her eyes were cold and shiny as sea-wet pebbles. "Shopping for you and your friend, I suppose. Nice for you, having your young man down from London so quick. Misses you, I expect."

When I responded with stony silence, she went blithely on. "Though I daresay you'll be setting your sights a bit higher now, won't you?" Perhaps realizing the appalling rudeness of her remark she hastily began gathering groceries.

"Good morning, Miss Compton. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," said Mrs. Stockley at last. "Busy day, this. What can I get for you?"

Millie Harper thrust herself forward. "Seeing as how I only want a few things, and Miss Compton will want to buy half the shop, how about seeing to me first?"

Mrs. Stockley planted her hands firmly on the counter. "The young lady was here first and gets served first, Millie Harper. That's always been the way in this shop, as you very well know. First come, first served."

Hastily I intervened, anxious to see the back of Millie. "Please serve Mrs. Harper. I'm in no hurry at all. In fact I would rather wait."

With a grim face Mrs. Stockley began totting up the price of Millie's goods. "That'll be two pounds forty-eight," she said, after some lip-moving mental arithmetic.

"Disgraceful, I call it," was Millie's rejoinder. "Get detergent for half the price, I could, in Lessingfold."

"Then why don't you shop there?" Mrs. Stockley demanded fiercely.

"Don't have a car, do I? Buses are packed by the time they come in to Swaynhoe." She sniffed and began to stuff the goods into her bag. "All right for some people, riding around in fancy cars."

"Your Frank could take you into town. Unless he's afraid the local police might spot his expired registration plate," observed Mrs. Stockley tartly.

Millie bridled. "Don't miss a thing, do you? Well, if you looked a bit closer you'd see the sticker on the car window, saying as how he's applied for a new one."

"The mail isn't *that* slow. Three weeks that sticker's been on his car. Not that it's any of my business," Mrs. Stockley added blandly, and held our her hand for Millie's money.

The woman paid and marched out of the shop, bristling with indignation. Mrs. Stockley's manner immediately changed. "Now, Miss Compton, what was it you wanted? I'm real sorry as you should have been kept waiting."

I didn't want to be drawn into a discussion on the demerits of Millie Harper, but Mrs. Stockley was like a dog that has gnawed yet again on a half-buried bone, worrying over it continually as she served me.

"That Frank of hers, well, there's a rogue and no mistake. It's a miracle he hasn't been put behind bars long since. But when things get too hot for him, he just disappears for a while. Wish he'd disappear for good, that I do!"

Curiosity overcame me. "Do you mean he's an actual criminal?"

Mrs. Stockley gave me a quizzical glance, then turned back to my order. "Nothing as was ever proved, miss, except once, and then he got away with it, Mr. Herington going soft on things at the last minute. Worst day's work he ever did, letting that man off."

"Letting him off from what?"

"Frank used to work on the estate. Oh, nothing skilled—hedging, tree-falling, handyman's work. Helped the gamekeepers, too. Except I daresay he stole more pheasants then he reared. Long time ago, it was, before Mr. Simon married Miss Julia. Mr. Simon had started a market garden, sending cut flowers to market and all that kind of thing. Frank was put in charge of the delivering. Only, as it turned out, half the stuff never reached the market at all. Frank was spotted dumping half the vanload to a friend of his, chap who runs a flower stall in the market. Nobody knows for sure how long it had been going on, but I daresay Frank had lined his pockets very nicely. After that, of course, Mr. Herington fired him. It would have been better if he'd taken him to court. Taught Frank a lesson, that would have. Instead of which, he goes scot-free. Disappeared from the village for a while, but six months later he was back and hanging round the estate again. Kept out of Mr. Simon's way, of course. When Mr. Simon was there, at any rate. Trouble being, Mr. Simon was always off on these concert tours and didn't know the half of what went on."

Mrs. Stockley had a real talent for cliff-hangers. It was with this one that she finished assembling my groceries and packed them into my basket. I paid her and left the shop. As I walked back to Vine Cottage, I found myself wondering what Frank Harper's interest in the estate had been after his dismissal. And what was it that Simon Herington "hadn't known the half of."

I was working well. There were times when every pencil stroke was a labor, when my soft eraser flailed across the paper and my temper grew short. But there were other times, and this was one of them, when the pictures in my brain flowed smoothly through to the pencil in my fingers, and when I saw Laura's words take the visual form that had always so astonished and delighted her.

"Anna, my dear, how could you have known that I meant Hal to stop just there, so that his features are reflected in the water? I'm sure I didn't make a point of it in the book."

"No, you didn't, but it seemed right. The lake is so important, and by showing his reflection I was able to illustrate two emotions: his hope and, by blurring his features in the reflection, his anxiety."

"Laura, what gave you the idea for the Prince Hal books?" I had asked. "They're very different from your earlier books."

We had been walking in the woods. It was springtime, and the ground was a misty sheen of bluebells. She bent to pick a few, not dragging them up by their stalks, as the ignorant do, but gently snapping them.

"I think most writers have one book they always dream of achieving. One that is infinitely better than the others and says everything that the writer wants—and needs—to say. Sometimes, it is the first book; often it is the only book. In my case, I believe the Prince Hal saga will bring my writings to an end."

She spoke with calm detachment. I hardly knew how to answer. Yet there was one very obvious assumption to be made from what she had said. "You almost imply that the Prince Hal books are autobiographical!"

Although I had spoken lightly enough, Laura flushed. She gripped the bluebells so tightly that I saw the stalks flatten under her fingers.

"Not at all. You are being fanciful, Anna! It's just that I...well, I think I have expressed myself more colorfully and certainly more excitingly in the Prince Hal series. It would be a pity to write something later that would be an anticlimax." Then she firmly changed the subject.

When the thump of the door knocker finally interrupted me, I sighed. Tired though my fingers were, I did not want to stop. I wiped the worst of the smudges off with my painting rag and went to see who my visitor was.

To my surprise, I found Cathy Bernstein standing outside.

"I hope you don't mind my dropping by? The last time we met you said I could. I was on my way back to the house, but, well, I've been out for just *hours*, and I'm so dry I can't tell you!" It must have been apparent to her that I had been working, for she quickly added, "If it's a bad time, a glass of water will be just fine."

"It's high time I made some tea," I reassured her. I had forgotten all about the time, as I so often do when I'm working. "Come in, won't you?"

She followed me through the sitting room and on into the kitchen. I saw her glance with curiosity at the desk where I had been sketching, but she was too well-mannered to go over and look at my work. As I filled the kettle and switched it on, she sank gratefully onto a chair.

"Gee, I don't know when I've been so tired! I've sure walked my feet off today."

It was difficult to imagine Cathy tramping along the country lanes. Yet her shoes were white with dust. "Have you been exploring our local beauty spots?" I asked. "If so, it's a pity you didn't call in here first. Laura—Miss Anderson—has left a shelf full of maps. She was a great walker."

Cathy laughed. "Oh, I don't need maps! I have something much better. A guide. A real countryman. It makes all the difference. Someone who knows a place can bring it really alive!" Her voice was full of enthusiasm.

"It sounds as though you've struck lucky," I agreed. "Who is he? One of Mr. Herington's staff?"

"Heck, no! Simon would be furious if I took any of his estate workers on jaunts! He gets uptight enough when he finds me in the stables, talking to the grooms. Says I waste their time." She smiled with what seemed to me a touch of malice. "No, Frank doesn't work for Simon. As a matter of fact, I get the feeling he doesn't care much for him. Not that he's said so, in so many words, but then he wouldn't, would he? Not to me."

The kettle was boiling. I switched if off and hoped my stunned expression would pass for concentration as I poured water into the teapot. "You're not referring to Frank Harper, by any chance?"

"Why, yes, that's his name. How did you guess? Or is he the local expert on country matters?"

I put a cup in front of her and pushed the sugar bowl in her direction, but she grimaced as though I had offered her arsenic.

"How did you meet Frank Harper?" I asked, trying to keep my voice neutral.

She giggled. "That's the funny thing! I'd seen him often enough around the village, only he'd never spoken, and I don't mind telling you I was getting real curious about him. Then this morning I was in Lessingfold and suddenly there he was, asking could he carry my packages for me. It was such a quaint coincidence, his being outside that pharmacy just when I came through the door."

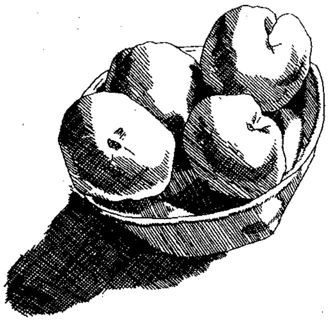
Some coincidence, I reflected! Frank had undoubtedly spotted Cathy in the town and followed her. Yet why should he? The thought of it made me uneasy.

"Of course, he had his car there," she was saying. "So of course he gave me a lift back to Swaynhoe, and we just kind of took it from there." She must have seen my eyebrows go up. "He asked if I'd like to take a walk, and it seemed like a great idea. I can't tell you what a great time I've had. You know, I was getting so *bored*. I'd never have known how really interesting the country was, if it hadn't been for Frank."

I thought my tea was going to choke me. Carefully I put my cup down. What on earth ought I to do? It was hardly up to me to warn her that Frank Harper's reputation was decidedly unsavory. But, as things turned out, I didn't get the chance. She looked at the very expensive watch on her wrist, wailed about being most dreadfully late and getting into Simon's bad books, and said she must go.

I offered her a lift back to the manor, but she shook her head.

"Frank's going to take me. I told him I wanted to drop by and see you, and he's waiting at the end of the lane. I told him not to bother, but he wouldn't hear of my walking."



"He's taking you to the manor?" I echoed. If Simon saw him, there would be one almighty explosion! He'd been told in no uncertain terms not to set foot on the Herington estate.

"Well, he's going most of the way," Cathy said. Then she went through a rapid burst of thank-you's. I was glad when she ran down the path and I could close the door behind her.

I was disturbed. I kept telling myself that Cathy Bernstein was no concern of mine. Nor, for that matter, was the feud between Simon Herington and Frank Harper. At last, albeit with some difficulty, I returned to my work and shut the whole business out of my mind.

By teatime of that day I had roughed out two preliminary sketches for the book. When at last I found the perfect idea, I got my box of colors. Then, for the second time that day, someone knocked on my front door.

My fingers, I noticed ruefully as I went to the door, were smudged with paint. Doubtless my face was, too, for I have a lamentable habit of gnawing at my knuckles when I am thinking.

Simon Herington stood on my doorstep. He had come in his Bentley, which stood in the lane, engine still running. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Miss Compton," he said, "but I wonder whether Cathy is with you? She's not at the manor, and you're just about the only person she knows in these parts."

"No, Cathy isn't here," I told him. "In fact I haven't seen anyone for hours. I've been working." I studied his face. He looked disturbed.

"She was up unusually early this morning, and went out. I had arranged for a few friends to come in for dinner tonight, people I thought might interest her, and she hasn't been seen all day."

Yet she had been on her way back to the manor some time ago! "You'd better come in," I said. "How about switching off your car engine?"

A few moments later he followed me into the house. "Am I to infer you know something of Cathy's whereabouts?" He sounded more resigned than angry.

"Not directly. That's to say, I've no idea where she is at this moment, but I did see her earlier this afternoon. I suppose it would have been somewhere around five o'clock." Lamely I added, "I lose track of time when I'm working."

He was watching me, and his eyes were thoughtful.

"Cathy turned up here around five.

We had tea and talked for a while. She said she'd been into Lessingfold this morning and had met Frank Harper. He offered her a lift back to the village, and she accepted."

Simon Herington's face was growing darker and more angry. I hurried on. "Obviously they had got on well. He gave her a line about being an expert on country matters."

I waited for the storm to break, but he held himself under control. "Why would she accept a lift from a man she didn't know?"

"She told me she'd often seen Frank, and that he was invariably courteous. Frank has obviously bowled her over. When I offered her a lift back to the manor, she refused, saying that Frank was waiting at the end of the lane and was going to drive her back. That's all I know."

"She didn't arrive at the manor!" Now his voice was taut with anxiety. "What time did she leave you?"

I mentally cursed myself for being so vague. All I could say was that I guessed she'd been with me for about half an hour.

"So she should have been at the manor by six, allowing for an error on your part. It's now after seven." He got up and began to pace the room, which, because he was so tall, seemed to be reduced to a miniature size. "Where on earth can she be?"

"Is it possible Frank could have persuaded her to stop for a drink at the local pub? If I was wrong about the time, I mean, and if it was nearer six when she left here?"

"I can't think it's likely. You say she had just finished drinking tea!"

"Yes, but there might have seemed a bit of glamor in going into a genuine English pub," I said.

"Even so, she would have downed a quick half of cider and then come home."

"Look, you have guests coming. Why don't I run over to Millie Harper's and see if she knows anything. You should be at the manor in case anyone arrives early—or if Cathy returns. If I learn anything, I'll telephone as soon as I can."

"What I would *really* like," he said slowly, "is for you to join us for dinner, Miss Compton. That's if you have no other plans?"

"That's not necessary," I said quickly, feeling that he was trying to return the favor I was doing him.

His mouth twitched. "I wasn't inviting you because I felt there to be a need! I would like your company. I was thinking about it yesterday, but I assumed your Mr. Lincoln was still here and that you would be spending the evening together."

"He really isn't *my* Mr. Lincoln," I said quietly. "We're professional associates."

"More than that, surely?" His eyes were probing me.

"Friends," I agreed. "No more, no less."

"Then he must be a very disappointed man," came the surprising reply.

"I beg your pardon?"

"My dear Miss Compton, anyone with half an eye can see that he's quite fascinated by you."

I could feel myself going scarlet. "Hugh has a naturally demonstrative manner. And an affectionate nature. In any case," I added hastily, "he's one of those men who can't live without female companionship. Which is why he took Cathy to dinner last evening." I picked my car keys off the table. "I'll get off to Millie Harper's and see what I can find out. As for the dinner invitation, I would be delighted to accept. Is it formal?"

He shook his head. "No. Wear anything at all."

I saw his eye travel briefly over my paint-streaked jeans, and I laughed out loud. "I promise to change and make myself respectable!"

He joined in my laughter, and once again that severe face lightened. "I hadn't supposed you would come as your are. Not that I should have turned you away. I'm looking forward to your company far too much for that."

If Simon Herington's housekeeper was surprised at the addition to the dinner party, she was too well trained to give any sign of it. She greeted me pleasantly and would have ushered me into the drawing room, from where I heard the sound of conversation and laughter, but before she had a chance to do so Simon himself came into the hall. The smile that had been fixed on his face evaporated as soon as he had left his guests. He hurried toward me.

"Has Cathy shown up?" I asked, as soon as Mrs. Dunkley was out of earshot.

He shook his head. "Was young Harper in the house?"

"No. She said he was working. He's a porter at the hospital in Lessingfold. But I telephoned and he hasn't reported for duty. The head porter was very irritable. There's been no message, no excuse."

"Oh, my God!" Simon wiped a distraught hand across his face. "Then it would seem Frank Harper is still with Cathy. But where on earth could they be?"

"I daresay he's taken her for a meal somewhere. A pub that does chicken-in-the-basket, or something of that kind. It would be a real feather in his cap, can't you see, to walk into some place where he was known, with Cathy on his arm."

I saw him wince. Hastily I added, "I'm sure she'll turn up, frantic with apologies as soon as she remembers your dinner party."

"I expect you're right." The worry had not lifted from his face. Then, rather heavily, he said, "I'm extremely grateful to you, Miss Compton. And I'm being an abominable host. I propose to put Cathy right out of my mind for the next two hours. Let me take you in to meet my friends."

I soon found myself being introduced to a group of people who stood chatting together. There was an attorney with a bland smiling face but the sharpest eyes I had ever seen. There was an elderly colonel and his rather subdued wife, a professor of music, and a genial man whom Simon introduced as the local veterinary sugeon. I wondered whether such an assorted group would find enough in common to keep conversation going round the dinner table.

As it turned out, the evening was extremely pleasant. If Simon was still worrying about his young charge, he gave no hint of it.

When the meal was over, we went back to the drawing room for coffee and liqueurs. I saw Simon's eyes go more and more frequently to the grandfather clock that ticked quietly in the corner. I sensed that his anxiety about Cathy was returning. It was after ten-thirty.

Yet he gave no indication to his guests that he wished the party to break up. It was Professor Abrahams who, obviously possessing some sixth sense where Simon was concerned, got to his feet fifteen minutes later and with graceful apologies said that he really must be on his way, as he had to drive back to London. The colonel's wife, who had already stifled more than one yawn, eagerly grasped the opportunity to make her own excuses. Her husband, well into his third brandy, was far from pleased, but after a muttered protest he rather grudgingly finished his drink,

If you remember'st not the slightest folly
That ever love did make thee run into
Thou hast not lov'd.

William Shakespeare
As You Like It

shook Simon by the hand, rattled off a few brusque clichés, and allowed himself to be led away.

The barrister and the veterinarian seemed to settle down for a late evening when an emergency call came in for the vet. Both men said their goodbyes and before long we heard the last car heading away from the house.

When Simon came back into the room I was shocked by his drawn, anxious expression. Once more he looked at the grandfather clock. "Five minutes past eleven. Anna, this has gone beyond a joke. The devil of it is, I've no idea what to do next!"

It gave me a pleasant jolt to be called by my Christian name. "I can't think what to do, either, Simon. There's no legitimate reason for calling the police. It's not as though Frank Harper has a criminal record."

"He's a villain, nonetheless," Simon said. "But you're right, it's not a police matter. Millie Harper is our only chance. I'll go there, and see if Frank has come home."

"May I come with you? I would like to know where Cathy is. I'm as worried about her as you are."

He looked surprised and then turned to me with an intent look. "Certainly come if it would ease your mind. I'd be grateful for your company."

It was a warm, still night, with the moon riding high and clear in the sky. The trees in the park stood like pale, grave sentinels. Somewhere, an owl hooted and was answered at a distance by another. Simon got into the car, but I stood where I was for a moment, breathing in the scented air. I turned to look at the house. It stood as it had stood for generations, emanating a sort of sheltering peace. How many troubled souls had found refuge in it? Would it have that effect on Simon in time, I wondered? Would it heal the wound of his wife's death?

Simon had opened the passenger door and was waiting for me. I pulled myself out of my abstraction and got into the car beside him. He said nothing until he had circled the carriage-sweep and the car was moving slowly between the ghostly trees of the drive.

"The manor fascinates you, Anna, doesn't it?"

"Yes. Partly because it's so beautiful. And again because, in some way I can't explain, it's so closely tied in my mind with Laura."

Simon asked me then how we'd been getting on with Laura's papers. I realized I hadn't told him yet what we'd discovered about the love poems.

"You may remember Hugh Lincoln talking about some poems he had found among Laura's papers. There are one or two odd features about them." He gave me a quick look, but then he turned his eyes back to the road. "In the first place, Laura didn't write the poems herself. They were written *for* her. There's some kind of signature at the foot of each of them. Not a signature exactly but a kind of hieroglyphic. I wondered if you could make sense of it. It has me baffled."

"Who would write poems to Laura?" Simon asked, rather stiffly.

"I don't know. They must be quite old; the paper is faded and so is the ink. In any case, love poems are written when one is young."

"You think Laura once had a lover?"

"Is that so unlikely? To judge from photographs, she was an attractive young woman."

He did not answer. Once again I had the feeling that I had been trespassing on ground he did not want me to tread. Yet why? If he had known Laura intimately, as I was certain he had, and if he knew of this long-dead love affair, why should he make a mystery of it?

When we arrived at the Harpers' house, Simon stopped the car. "Do you mind waiting while I go in?"

"Of course not."

I saw the hall light go on, heard the rattle of a bolt being drawn back, and then I saw Millie Harper's dressing-gowned figure in the doorway. Simon said something to her, pushed his way into the house, and then the door closed, and I had no company but my thoughts.

It seemed a lifetime before Simon reappeared. He said nothing until he had started the engine, swung the car round in a tight turn, and was heading back to the village.

"She hasn't the slightest idea where Frank is. She hasn't seen him all day."

"So we're no further along!" I felt very confused. "Is it worth going back to my cottage to see if by any chance Cathy has turned up there?" Maybe if her conscience was troubling her for being out so late, and if she was expecting you to give her a lecture..." I let the sentence drop.

"She'll get a lecture, all right, when she comes back," was Simon's forceful answer. "This finishes it, so far as I'm concerned. Once she's safely back at the manor, I shall cable her parents and tell them I can't take the responsibility for her any longer."

"Isn't that rather like giving up?" I ventured.

"Giving up?" he exploded. "Look, Anna, that girl is my guest. She's young, pretty, and headstrong. She's a stranger in this country. If she's not prepared to behave sensibly, then *I'm* not prepared to face the consequences. I've problems enough of my own."

"Such as?" It was impertinent to press him, but I had the feeling he was distraught enough to speak his mind, and I was intensely curious to know more about this man.

"My career. Or what was formerly my career," he said, tersely. "Professor Abrahams and I talked for a long time this evening before the others arrived. He wants me to undertake a series of concerts this winter. I decided a long time ago that I would turn my back on music, once and for all. I agreed to do this one concert, but that's for charity. That was to be the end of it."

"What will you do with your time? Music has always been your life."

"There's the estate to manage. There's no possibility of my father's ever returning to take over."

"Surely you could combine the two things. With an efficient manager to run day-to-day matters on the estate, you would have the freedom and time to rehearse and take part in concerts."

"I told you, I've turned my back on music!" His voice was suddenly harsh, and I knew he didn't want me to ask any more questions. But I have a streak of obstinancy in me, and, of late, it had been aggravated by too many puzzles.

Boldly, outrageously, I said, "I can't think of *any* reason that would cause a man to give up the thing he loved most."

We had arrived at Vine Cottage now and Simon slammed on the brakes so fiercely that I was flung forward against my seat belt.

"Will nothing satisfy you, Anna? Very well, since you insist on putting me through this inquisition, I will tell you, and I hope the information will not cause you as many sleepless nights as it has caused me! I gave up my music because it was responsible for my wife's death."

The car engine was still running; his hands were clenched on the wheel. "Julia liked music. She didn't have my passion for it but, all the same, she was reasonably happy while I was at home, practicing. Perhaps she became a little restless at times. I know she wished I could give more time to entertaining, but that's natural enough. What she couldn't take, don't you see, was my long absences. I would be away for weeks, sometimes months if there was an overseas tour. She became unutterably lonely. In the end, she took her own life. I was in Munich when it happened. I caught the first plane back, but she was dead. Drowned. *I* did that to her, Anna! Do you suppose I shall ever be able to forgive myself? Do you imagine I shall ever be able to play again?"

He turned off the car engine. The silence was terrible.

At last, falteringly, I said, "I knew she had killed herself. I didn't know why."

He leaned across me and unceremoniously opened the passenger door. "It's late. I suggest you go and get some sleep."

"What will you do?" I could hardly get the words out.

"Drive around and look for Cathy, I suppose."

"Where will you look?"

"I don't know. But I have the feeling she can't be far away. She would never have consented to go any great distance with Harper. A local pub, perhaps, as you suggested. But the pubs closed a long time ago. Perhaps they had a fight, or he got drunk and she insisted on walking home. I'll try the nearby villages."

Numbly I got out of the car. The closeness I had felt with Simon over the past few hours had evaporated as morning mist fades when the sun breaks through. But there was no sunshine in my heart.

"Good night, then," I said.

"Good night, Anna."

Then I lifted my head. Distantly, from inside the cottage, I heard the faint, repetitious sound of the telephone.

"Simon, quickly!" I said, and ran for the front door, groping in my bag for my keys, praying that the ringing would not cease before I could get to the instrument. I switched a light on and flung myself across the room, snatching the telephone from its rest and gasping, "Hello."

"Anna? I hope I haven't got you out of bed?" Hugh Lincoln said.

I sagged into a chair. "No; Hugh. What is it? Why are you calling so late?" I was vaguely aware that Simon had followed me into the house.

"I had this extraordinary call," Hugh said. "From Cathy. I thought you ought to know about it."

"From Cathy? When was that? Where was she? Why did she telephone you? What did she say?" I fired the questions one after another.

"She was in a phone booth, but she didn't tell me where. She said she'd been out, but she wouldn't say with whom, only that she was frightened. I couldn't get much sense out of her. I kept telling her to go 'round to your place. I knew you would sort out whatever scrape she'd got into. But of course, if you haven't been at home, she could have knocked on your door and gone away again. Anna, what's going on?"

"I wish I knew," I said wearily, and filled him in on Cathy's disappearance.

I heard him groan. "Sounds nasty. Have you informed the police?"

"Not yet, but that's the next logical step. Hugh, how did she sound? What was she afraid of?"

"She wouldn't say. She was rambling and sounded hysterical. I'm positive she was alone when she called. That's why I tried to get her to go to your place."

"Then they must have had an argument or something. I'll tell Simon what you've told me. And thanks very much, Hugh."

I managed to get him off the line at last. When I relayed Hugh's information to Simon his face was grim.

I fought an impulse to go to him, to comfort him. "What should we do now?" I asked.

"This isn't your problem, Anna. I've already wrecked your evening. I'll continue looking for her and then, if I have no luck, I suppose I'll go to the police."

"Let me come with you, Simon. If—when—you find Cathy, she may be upset. I think I could help. Just let me get a jacket. I'm feeling a bit chilly in this thin dress."

He studied me then. It struck me that, for the first time that evening, he was seeing me as a woman. There was something about his glance that sent the color rushing up to my cheeks. I'd taken unusual care when I dressed for his dinner party, even though the occasion had been fraught with anxiety over Cathy.

"How very strange!" Simon said suddenly. "I've only just realized something. And yet it is so obvious." Then he frowned. "But Laura had begun writing the Prince Hal books before she knew you! It doesn't make sense at all."

"What doesn't make sense?" I stood in the doorway.

"The fact that Laura might have been describing you in those books," Simon said quietly. "'The girl with the moonbeams in her hair.' That's you, Anna. Yet how could Laura have known? How could she have known?"

There was no traffic, and he had turned the headlights full on, so that the white beams cut the sleeping lanes, bringing into sharp focus the lofty trees and lush summer hedgerows.

"Cold?" Simon asked, reaching for the heater.

"No. It's just that this is, well, somehow unreal. It's as though the whole world had gone to sleep, except for a few night creatures. We're invading their domain."

His reply surprised me. "I often drive at night, when I can't sleep. I usually park in one particular gateway I know of and walk up to the top of Hildenbury Hill." He pointed to a grassed knoll which lay to our right. "Sometimes I sit there for an hour or more. It's a very pleasant place. I took Cathy up there one afternoon soon after she arrived. We had a picnic." I sensed his grimace. "She complained about the flies. What was worse, she kept quizzing me about why I liked that particular spot. I wasn't going to tell her that it was one of Julia's favorites, so instead I told her about the monks from Wearstone Abbey who used to walk all the way up to the top of the hill at dawn on midsummer day to pray for the souls of sinners."

It was the first time Simon had voluntarily mentioned his wife's name. I knew it would be a mistake to comment, yet all the same I felt that it denoted a small step forward. Simon's anguish about Julia had been locked inside him for far too long.

He was methodically working his way to and fro about the empty lanes. It was several minutes before a thought began to take shape in my mind.

"Simon, let's assume that Cathy had an argument with Frank Harper and somehow gave him the slip. She was afraid to go back to the manor, yet she would expect you to go looking for her. So isn't there a possibility she would wait for you in some place that you both know?"

In the moonlight which filtered into

the car I saw him turn his head. His eyes gleamed strangely. "What are you suggesting?"

"That hill you mentioned where you took her for a picnic. Would she remember where it was?"

"She wouldn't have to remember," Simon said. "It's the highest point of land in this whole valley."

He changed gear, and the car leaped forward. "It's worth a try, Anna. I'm a fool not to have thought of it before. But then, I've never understood the workings of the female mind. Women are a complete and utter mystery to me. I suppose that's why I made such a hopeless mess of my marriage. Not knowing what Julia wanted. Assuming she would be happy to let me go on living my life the way I'd always lived it."

He seemed determined to take the whole blame for the disaster of his marriage. Quietly I said, "Music *was* your life; Julia must have known that. In agreeing to marry you, she would have known what was involved." Tentatively I added, "In any case, you must surely have invited her to join you on your concert tours?"

"Of course I did. But she found it very tiring. She hated continually moving from one hotel to another. She was bored by the amount of time I had to spend rehearsing."

He didn't conjure up a picture of a woman with much understanding, but I made no comment. As if anxious to change the subject, Simon pointed out the window on his side of the car.

"There's the hill. If we're going up it, it will have to be on foot; there's no road." He nosed the car onto the grassy verge that flanked the lane and switched off the lights.

Just then, I thought I heard a sound. I gripped Simon's arm. "Listen!"

The two of us stood perfectly still. At first all I could hear was the mechanical sound of a cooling car engine, but then, and for the second time, I squeezed Simon's arm. "I'm sure there's someone here. That was a footstep. I heard a twig snap."

"Cathy?" Simon called out, the loudness of his voice in the stillness of the night making me jump. "Cathy, is that you?"

But no girl's figure came running toward us. All the same, there *was* someone within earshot. I heard a stealthy rustle moving away from us.

Simon heard it, too. "Cathy, it's me, Simon. And Anna's here, too. Come on, there's a good girl. Let's get you home."

Now the feet were running. Simon muttered something that sounded like "little idiot!" and then he was off in pursuit. I set off after him, but I was still wearing the high-heeled sandals I'd worn for the dinner party, and I stumbled over a clump of grass. When I looked for Simon, he had disappeared. The moon had chosen this particular moment to disappear behind a floating bank of clouds. I found myself wishing Simon hadn't turned off the car's lights.

I peered into the darkness and then blinked my eyes. I thought I had seen a glimmer of something—a white blouse? I tried to remember what it was that Cathy had been wearing when she had called at Vine Cottage that afternoon. Jeans, rather dusty . . . and, yes, a short-sleeved white shirt. But the fleeting glimpse I'd caught hadn't come from the direction in which the footsteps had sounded, but from much higher up the hill.

If Cathy was here, she wasn't alone!

I, too, began to run, but not after Simon. I went as fast and as quietly as I could toward the spot where I'd seen the glimmer of light. If she was there, she was hiding and afraid. I cursed my unsuitable shoes. My dress, too—my lovely, favorite dress—was being caught on bushes, and probably hopelessly snagged. Yet none of this mattered. If Cathy *were* up there on the hillside, I had to find her, and quickly.

A moment later I caught my first full glimpse of her. I stopped running and called her name, adding, for the moon had not yet ridden clear of clouds, "Cathy, it's me, Anna. Everything's all right! Simon's with me. We've come to take you home."

For a terrible moment I thought I had frightened her and that she would start running again, but then, cautiously at first and then more readily, she came into the open and began to move toward me. I caught my breath in shock. Her long dark hair was disheveled, falling about her face. Her white shirt was stained. I saw a gaping tear on the leg of her jeans.

I ran toward her and reached out for her hands. They were cold as ice. "Cathy! Thank God! Are you all right?"

Her only answer was a high hysterical sob. When it subsided she choked, "I thought you would never come. Where have you been? You weren't at the cottage when I went there looking for you."

"No, I was at the manor all evening. Come on, now, the car's in the lane."

She twisted free of my grasp. "But where's *he?*"

"Simon? He went the other way. He thought he heard you."

"Not Simon! *Him!* Frank."

"Frank's here?"

"He's still after me. I gave him the slip, earlier on. That's when I went to your place. But he must have guessed I would. He saw me." Tears glazed her eyes. "He wouldn't give up. I remembered this place. I thought I could lose him, but he's a devil. He was never more than a few hundred yards away." The sobs began again. "It's been awful . . . awful."

I put an arm about her shoulders and felt her shaking. "Come on. We'll get in the car, and then I'll go and find Simon."

"Frank's drunk," she said wildly. "He's like someone crazy. He'll hurt Simon. He hates him, did you know that? He kept saying something about bringing him down. I don't know what he was talking about."

My mouth was dry with fear, but I managed to say, "Simon can take care of himself," and then I began to steer her down the hill, toward the safety of the car. My thoughts were in a turmoil. There were a dozen questions I wanted to ask Cathy, but this was no time for them. Together we stumbled down the hill. It seemed an endless journey. At last we were in the lane, and I was bundling Cathy into the car.

"Lock the doors," I said to her. "Don't unlock them until Simon and I come back."

"Where are you going? Please stay here with me!" She clawed at me like a wild thing.

"I have to fetch Simon," I said firmly "You'll be all right."

"But Frank's out there!" she cried.

"He won't dare do anything," I said with more confidence than I felt. "Now, do as I say. Lock the car doors. I shan't be long."

I waited until she had done as I ordered, and then I set off again, this time in the direction I had seen Simon go. Several times I paused to listen, but I heard nothing. At last I steeled myself to call out. "Simon? Cathy's safe. Come back to the car."

My voice echoed weirdly in the quiet night but then, to my infinite relief, I heard footsteps coming toward me at a run, and a figure broke clear of the bushes.

"Simon!" I cried thankfully. But then my heart lurched. It wasn't Simon Herington who was running in my direction. It was Frank Harper. In the moonlight that was once more bathing the hillside, his eyes glittered like those of a madman.

"Bitch!" he shouted. "Interfering

bitch! Why did you have to come down here? All gone quiet, hadn't it, only you had to come raking it all up again. Well, I'll make you wish you hadn't."

To my horror, I saw that he was holding a heavy stick, jagged at one end, where it must have been ripped from a tree. I'm no heroine. I turned and ran for the car, only those damned sandals of mine tripped me again, and I stumbled, half falling. I heard Frank close behind me and then felt a sudden fierce pain shoot through my head. The trees and the sky became swinging arcs that whirled about me crazily. After that, I don't remember anything at all.

The voices came and went, men's voices, only one of them familiar: Simon's. It was as though my eyelids were lead-weighted. I forced them open, felt them droop, pushed them open again. The ceiling was very high. Ornate, with cupids dancing across it. Were they dancing? Or was it that my head was spinning? I concentrated on one particular cupid, and slowly he came to a standstill. I tried to move, and a stabbing pain shot through my skull. "Damn!" I said.

The voices ceased. Simon's face swam into focus, then cleared. "Anna, don't try and move! Oh, my dear girl, are you all right?" He reached out and grasped one of my hands in both of his own.

His grip pulled me back to reality. I was lying on a bed in a very elaborately decorated room, to judge from the florid, gilded ceiling. Light came softly from table lamps with brocaded shades.

"If this is heaven, it's more baroque than I had anticipated," I said, and wondered why my voice sounded so faint and shaky.

Simon looked at me wonderingly for a moment; then almost disbelievingly he smiled, although in a strained fashion.

"You can joke, after what happened? Anna, you're the most remarkable person I've met in the whole of my life." His grip tightened on my hand. "But you must rest. No more talking."

A figure appeared beside him, and I recognized the doctor who had attended Cathy after she had been thrown from her horse.

"Let her talk! It's better that she should stay awake." He turned my head with gentle fingers. Gentle though they were, it was hard not to cry out with pain.

Gasping, I said, "It feels as though someone tried to crack my head open!"

"Someone did," Simon replied tersely.

"Frank Harper?"

He nodded, his face tight with anger. "He got away. But the police are out looking for him. He won't get far. The worst of it is that I was only twenty yards behind him when you called out. I'd realized soon after we separated that it was Frank, not Cathy. It seemed more important to catch him before he could do any more harm." In a voice that shook he added, "I was too late. Oh God, Anna, I wouldn't have had this happen for the world!"

"She'll be all right," the doctor intervened briskly. "Provided she takes things easy for a few days." Then, turning to me, he said, "All the same, I'm going to take you to the hospital, for X-rays, as soon as you feel you can get off that bed. I'm fairly certain you've got only surface contusions, but I want to be sure."

"How's Cathy?" I asked.

"She's sleeping. I gave her a sedative," the doctor answered.

"She's all right," Simon reassured me. "She'd been badly frightened. She'd been on the run from Harper for a couple of hours. You were right, Anna. She remembered the hill and guessed I might go looking for her there."

The doctor shook his head warningly at Simon. "Not now. This young lady should be taken to the hospital." He turned to me. "Do you feel fit enough to make the journey?"

"Oh, I'm fine," I said, and tried to sit up. The pain was sickening and, despite myself, this time I did cry out. At once Simon's arm was round my shoulders, supporting me. And suddenly I was aware of the most curious sensation. A feeling of warmth and renewed strength began to flow through me. I didn't want to move, didn't want that protective arm taken away. I looked into Simon's face, and what I read in his eyes made the blood race wildly through my viens. "Will you come with me?" I whispered.

"Do you think anything in this world would stop me?" was his reply.

THE MEETING

by Helen Benson

We met each other long ago,
I don't remember how
By whose plan or contrivance
It hardly matters now.

I only know a silence broke
And made a space for laughter
And that the sun, long hidden, rose
To smile, the morning after.

At the hospital, I was dealt with quickly and efficiently. The doctor in charge wanted me to stay until the next day for observation, but I wouldn't have it. Simon had followed the ambulance, in his car, and as we left the hospital he helped me into it as though I were made of porcelain. He could be very tender. Once again my heart began to race.

"Tell me about Cathy," I said, as he switched on the engine.

He gave a weary sigh. "Apparently, when she left you, she *did* intend to return to the manor. Somehow Frank conned her into having a drink at a nearby pub. Almost certainly he spiked it. She had asked for bitter lemon, but she says that as soon as she'd drunk it she felt light-headed. She says she completely forgot about the dinner party. When Frank drove her away from the pub, he suggested driving back to the manor via Wearstone so that she could have a look at the ruins of abbey. He said it wasn't far out of the way. Needless to say, his car conveniently broke down when they were halfway there."

I shivered. "Did he attack her?"

"He tried to. It had obviously been in his mind all evening. Cathy admits it was partly her fault. He'd begun flirting with her in the pub. She was feeling light-headed, and she found it amusing. When they left the pub and he talked about showing her the abbey, she was sure she could handle him." He shook his head in weary disbelief. "It wasn't until he stopped the car, saying something had gone wrong, that she began to get scared. She got out of the car and told him she was going to walk home. Then, of course, he grabbed her, but Cathy, thank God, has plenty of the wildcat in her. She scratched his face with her fingernails, and for a moment he was forced to let go."

"What then?"

"She ran," Simon said. "Frank went back to his car, thinking he would catch her more easily if he used a vehicle, but Cathy had the sense to keep to fields. Some homing instinct eventually brought her back to Swayhoe, and she rang Hugh. He'd given her his number, and she had it in her handbag. She couldn't find your number in the book, of course, because the telephone at Vine Cottage is still listed under Anderson. As you know, Hugh suggested she should go over to Vine Cottage, and she did, but of course she got no answer when she knocked."

"Why didn't she go to the manor, once she realized I was out?"

"Because she saw Frank's car go past

the cottage. It was pretty obvious to Cathy that Frank would lie in wait for her near the manor, and she wasn't going to take the risk of his catching her again. That's when she remembered the hill. By this time she was sure I would be out looking for her, and she said she was praying all the time that I would remember Hildenbury Hill."

"But Frank was on his way to the Manor? . . ."

"His car ran out of gas halfway up the lane. He'd got out, and heard this frantic knocking on your door. He guessed right away it was Cathy, and the whole appalling chase started all over again. Once, he was close enough to shout at her. Something about having things to tell her about me. That he could ruin my reputation. But Cathy just kept on running."

Simon was silent for a long time. Then, as if he had guessed what was on my mind, he said, "There's a lot about my past that Cathy doesn't know, but she may have heard the gossip. There was a great deal of vicious talk in this neighborhood after my wife's death. I was held largely to blame for it. As of course I was," he added bleakly.

"Your wife committed suicide. Whatever the reasons—and I can't accept that you were entirely to blame—what hold could Frank Harper possibly have over you?"

"None, that I can see. But Cathy couldn't know that. And she feels, I suppose, a certain loyalty to me as her host."

He spoke as though such a thing were incomprehensible. "I'm sure she feels far more warmly than that," I stated.

"Why should she? I've not been much of a companion to her. But then, I've never understood women. And I'm certainly not noted for my charm."

"I wish you would stop running yourself down," I burst out. "I've never heard you admit that you have a single good quality. It's becoming very tiresome!"

For a second there was a stunned silence. Then, to my astonishment, Simon laughed. "What an extraordinary person you are, Anna! I don't know anyone else who would have dared to say that."

"Why not? Because they're afraid of those black moods of yours? Well, I'm not. So far as I'm concerned, I see you as a highly talented man with a great many fine qualities that you do your best to hide." I felt myself flush scarlet, and I was thankful for the darkness of the car's interior. "Have you never stopped to consider the fact that Julia loved you enough to marry you? Would she have done that, if you were the grizzly bear you pretend to be?"

"I was different, then," he said, in the bleak voice I had come to know so well. "Younger, less thorny, not such a recluse."

"One can become a recluse for two reasons. One is a very valid one—that one needs to live in a private world, for religious or other equally important motives. The other is that one is frightened to face reality."

He gave me a wry glance. "You think I fall in the latter category?"

"I think you've been hurt and that you want to heap all the blame for Julia's death on yourself. To punish yourself. It's about time you stood back and took a long, cool look at the past. Then put it where it belongs, which is behind you. You have your life to live, a career to go back to. If you could only begin to know what pleasure your music gave to people, you would realize how absurd it is to let your talent go to waste.

"I wish you weren't always right, Anna," Simon said quietly. "You have an uncanny gift for hitting the nail squarely on the head. I've looked at my piano a hundred times, knowing that if I leave things much longer, the day will come when I can never return to it. When I came back to England I was certain that it had.

"Now you're not so sure?"

"I don't know what's happening to me. It's almost like a change of season. . . ."

We were turning into the lane, and he slowed the car outside my cottage. Then he said, "I think it's because of you, Anna. It must be something to do with your vitality—your love of life. You've stirred something in me that I thought was dead forever."

I found that I was trembling. I couldn't think of anything to say. But then, as if deliberately, he broke the mood.

"What will you need for the night? Not much, I imagine. Nightgown, toothbrush? And something a bit more practical than that dress."

"What do you mean? I shall be in bed and asleep within ten minutes."

"Not here, you won't," Simon said forcefully. "Do you think I would let you spend the rest of the night alone in the cottage? The police may not have caught Harper yet. You're coming back to the manor. Mrs. Dunkley will have prepared a room for you by now."

I realized it was no use arguing with Simon. I went into the cottage and picked up what I'd need for the night. I got as far as the sitting room on my way out when a distressing thought occurred to me, stopping me cold. Frank Harper was still on the loose. He had broken in once before, looking for something. If he hadn't found whatever it was, he might come back. I put my bag down and went to the front door. Simon was watching, and when he saw me beckon he got out of the car immediately and came at a run.

"Has something happened, Anna?"

"No, but there's something I ought to have told you, long before this. I don't suppose it has any connection with what happened tonight, but all the same . . ."

Then I told him of my belief that Frank had got into the cottage the day I had lunched with Hugh. My evidence sounded terribly flimsy—papers I thought had been disturbed, photographs moved. Simon listened gravely.

"Are you convinced it was Harper?"

"Who else? He'd been watching the cottage ever since I moved in."

"So you think he wanted to go through Laura's papers? I can't think why they would be of any interest to him."

"Nor can I. There were manuscripts, but obviously those wouldn't have been of the slightest use to him. There were photographs, but I've been through those, and they're ordinary enough."

"How about diaries?" Simon asked slowly. "Did Laura keep any?"

"I found some," I said. Rather defensively I added, "I've locked them away. Without looking into them, I need hardly add. I've been trying to make up my mind whether I'm justified in destroying them."

"Surely Laura would have done that herself, if she had wanted them disposed of? From what I've heard, she made a pretty neat job of clearing up her effects. What she left here was for *you*, Anna."

"She can't have meant me to read her personal diaries," I protested. "Why on earth should she?"

"I don't know." Simon appeared equally baffled. "But we're getting way off the subject. What could Frank Harper have been looking for?"

"What was it he shouted to Cathy? Something about ruining your reputation?" I regretted the words as soon as I had spoken them. Simon's face went white. He didn't reply.

"I don't really want to leave the cottage tonight," I said. "You say the police are after Frank. If he didn't find what he was looking for last time, he'll come back. This will be his last chance."

"You're not staying here alone," Simon insisted. "But if you feel so strongly about it I'll have the police watch the cottage in your absence."

This seemed a reasonable solution and I agreed—largely because I was too exhausted to think and my head was throbbing.

"Come along then, Anna," Simon said as he picked up my overnight bag. Then he took my arm, and the warmth and closeness of his grip was like a strong wave bringing me toward a safe shore.

It was ten o'clock when I woke up the next morning, and after making myself as presentable as I could, a maid showed me into the morning room, where breakfast dishes were still set out.

"It's good to see you looking so well, Anna!" Simon said. "How is your head this morning?"

"It's fine," I said cheerfully. "How is Cathy?" I was embarrassed by the warmth of his gaze.

He smiled. "Indulging in a great deal of female hysteria! "

"She must be very upset; she's been through a frightening experience."

"So have you, but I see no sign of hysterics." Simon peered into the coffee jug, then poured himself a cup. "By the way, I called Hugh Lincoln for you last night, to let him know that everyone was all right. He said he'd be down this morning. He was very concerned about you." He watched me closely for my reaction.

"It was very thoughtful of you to call him. Hugh is very protective.

"You've been through an experience that would have shattered many people, even assuming they would have the courage and compassion to act as you did."

"Compassion?"

"What is Cathy Bernstein to you? A girl you've only met a few times. Yet you were prepared to involve yourself without any question."

"It could have been me," I said hastily. "I might have fallen for Frank Harper's rather flashy charm."

"He hasn't been found yet," Simon said, with worry very evident in his voice. "I was talking to the police a short time ago. The police are keeping a watch on the cottage," Simon reassured me. "If you're right about Harper's breaking in there once before, he's likely to try again. He'll be desperate now."

"But desperate for what?" I asked helplessly.

"That's what we have to find out," Simon said. "In a sense it's none of my business; the papers Laura left in the cottage were meant for you. All the same, I would be extremely grateful if you would go through them thoroughly." Rather hesitantly he added, "Particularly those diaries you mentioned."

"Simon, must I? I don't feel I have the right. What can her past possibly have to do with me?"

He shook his head. "I can only assume she felt they might be valuable to you. Perhaps they weren't run-of-the-mill daily journals. They might contain ideas that would be helpful to you."

"All right, I'll go through everything today. "

Simon, too, had risen from the table. He reached out and grasped my hand in his own. "Thank you for everything, Anna. You've been wonderful."

I could have let my hand lie in his for a very long time, but that would have been foolish. I was the sensible one, wasn't I? The practical one. The girl who never had hysterics or lost her head. Or her heart. I almost ran up the wide staircase, knowing that Simon was watching me.

As I had expected, when Hugh arrived he was eager to hear every detail of the previous evening's happenings. At the end of my account he said, "It's an extraordinary business! That fellow Harper must be out of his mind. If he'd hurt Cathy, Simon Herington would have broken his neck."

"Unless he really does have some hold over Simon!"

"How could he have? Anyway, Herington has been out of the country for the past couple of years."

"It would have to relate to the past." Rather reluctantly I added, "Simon admitted there was a lot of vicious gossip when his wife died."

"Anna, does anyone really know why she committed suicide?"

"*I* don't," I admitted. "It's not something I could very well ask Simon about."

"It might be worth finding out," Hugh said thoughtfully. "In fact, if you've not objections, Anna, I think I might make a few inquiries."

"Of whom?"

"The local newspaper office would be the best source of information. I'll get them to let me look through their back copies. "

I found the idea repugnant, yet I was anxious to know what motivated Frank Harper. "Be careful how you go about it," I warned.

These things are much for one who loves—
A person can live by them alone—
That he and I breathe the same air,
And that the earth we tread is one.

Ramayana

"I will." Hugh gave me one of his winning smiles. "I'll turn on the old charm. With any luck, there'll be an impressionable girl in the front office. I'll think of some convincing tale."

"Yes, well, your charm has been known to work wonders!" I returned his smile.

"Ah, but not where I most want it to. I've never won *your* heart, Anna!" He picked up his jacket, which had been draped over a chair. At the door he paused with his hand on the latch. "The court jester had his place, while the prince was away. But now the prince has returned to his kingdom. I hope it won't take him too long to claim his princess!" Then he was gone.

I stood where I was, my heart thumping erratically. I knew very well what Hugh meant. Yet how could he have known what I had scarcely admitted to myself?

Simon! I was in love with Simon Herington. There was no point in trying to deny the fact any longer.

Yet there had been no indication that he felt anything for me except a kind of trusting friendship and, more recently, gratitude. Oh, once or twice he had looked at me with some kind of other emotion in his eyes; once he had even seemed on the verge of letting a warmer feeling make itself known. But that was all. It would be foolish indeed to count on his ever returning my love. He must not know how much I cared.

It was with a strong sense of misgiving that I unlocked the case in which I had stored Laura's diaries and sat on the bed, staring at the neat pile of personal records Laura had kept. There were five of them. With dismay I realized that she must have begun to record the details of her daily life at the time when it had first been disclosed to her that she had cancer. Slowly I opened the first of them.

"Another January begins," Laura had written. "There is snow on the ground outside my window. I have swept it from the grass by the lilac bushes and put down food for my birds. Now that it is winter, they are my responsibility. If I do not feed them, they will die. We all must die. Yet not yet, dear God, for a time! There is so much left to do."

Blinking eyes that had begun to smart, I hastily turned the page. There was no reference on that page, or the ones that followed, to Laura's knowledge that her life was to be cut short. I began to skim from one month to the next, for this was a fairly routine chronicle of a writer's life, What began to strike me forcibly as I read was Laura's isolation from the people of Swaynhoe. There were a few references to the Stockleys at the shop, and some decidedly irritable ones to her cousin Millie, who, it seemed, pestered her continually.

I turned the pages eagerly, but it was some time before Frank's name appeared, and then it was only a passing reference. "Simon has sacked Frank Harper and forbidden him ever to set foot on the estate again. Simon is finding it hard to combine the demands of his musical career with the duties of estate management. Julia shows signs of enjoying her new status as Lady of the Manor! There is an endless stream of cars on weekends, and I have seen some most unlikely folk wandering about the village. They stare at me with curiosity. I daresay Julia has spoken of the dotty writer who lives in Vine Cottage! Perhaps I should wear outlandish clothes and talk to myself; it would enhance my image."

I winced, not liking the picture the words conjured up. I let the pages slide through my fingers, but there was nothing relevant to my search. I picked up Laura's diary for the following year, and with a prickle of excitement I realized that this was the most critical year in Simon's life, the year Julia had died.

The tone of Laura's writing had changed. The pages I turned dealt almost exclusively with Simon and his wife. Julia complained that the musical circles he moved in were "deadly dull," and that she could think of nothing she wanted less to do than trail about Europe, listening to endless concerts.

I noticed that Laura passed no judgment on Julia's behavior; she merely recorded it, though I could sense an underlying sadness in her. Then, a few pages further on, I came to a strange entry.

"My photographs have come back. I obtained just the effect I was striving for with the pictures of the woods. There are, however, two *very disturbing* pictures. I don't know how I could have taken them without seeing what was so obviously there."

At the bottom of the page Laura had added—possibly at a later date, for it was with a different pen—"These pictures must never be seen by anyone. I ought to destroy them, yet something prevents me from doing so."

I laid the book down and sat staring at nothing. What had Laura's camera so inadvertently recorded?

Someone was knocking at the door. I'd forgotten all about Hugh. I hurried to let him in. His face was alight with excitement. He was brandishing a notebook.

"Anna, I've found what I was looking for in the newspaper files. There were a lot of pieces about Herington's concert tours but, as he was the local celebrity, that's understandable.

"It was five weeks after Herington's departure that Julia died. For a couple of days it was front-page material, with Simon canceling the rest of his tour and flying back on the first plane."

Hugh sucked in a deep breath. "Then came the coroner's inquest, and the typeface gets bigger and blacker. What the stories boil down to is that Julia was last seen on a Friday evening, around six o'clock. The coroner asked Mrs. Dunkley how Julia had seemed, and Mrs. D. described her as very depressed. When the coroner pressed her about this, she said that ever since Herington had gone away, his wife had been difficult and moody. She'd spend a lot of time away from the house, but apparently not all that far away, because she seldom used the car."

"That's odd in itself," Hugh went on. "You see, earlier in her evidence Mrs. D. had spoken of Julia's driving up to London at least twice a week on shopping expeditons. Suddenly she starts going out locally."

He waited for my reaction. I felt a prickle of uneasiness.

"Julia was found the next morning," Hugh went on. "One of the gardeners came past the lake on his way to work and saw the rowing boat overturned and the oars floating. A couple of lads who work in the greenhouses found Julia's body. It was trapped under the surface." Soberly he added, "The boat was floating near a mat of water lilies."

I felt quite sick. "It could have been an accident. Julia might have been trying to pick some of the lilies and turned the boat over."

"That was the first assumption. It was her suicide note that swung the verdict the other way. A letter to her husband. The coroner described it as hysterical and incoherent. He called it the letter of a woman apparently in a state of severe depression."

"I presume a doctor gave evidence?"

"Yes. A Harley Street man. Julia had gone to him a few years before, long before she married Herington. At that time she was suffering, in his words, from a state of nervous tension and anxiety, and he prescribed Valium. He remembered her as a highly unstable, overemotional young woman."

"What did the suicide letter say?"

"Julia told Simon she was sorry, that she had made a complete mess of everything, and that she couldn't see any other way out. By the time he got back, she wrote, it would 'all be over with.'" Grimly he added, "After that, she must have taken the boat out and drowned herself."

"But it *could* have been an accident," I insisted.

"The verdict was suicide while the balance of her mind was disturbed. The newspaper does say that it was a majority verdict, not a unanimous one, and the editor went so far as to write a warning about inexperienced people going out alone in boats."

I was stunned into silence. No wonder the village tongues had wagged. No wonder Simon had been shattered by grief and guilt. I pulled myself together.

"Hugh, the point of your going through those files was to see if you could find out where Frank Harper did in fact have any hold over Simon."

"Exactly!" Hugh sat back, watching me expectantly.

"But all this stuff you've dug up—it's old history."

"Perhaps Harper hoped it was," Hugh said quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"Julie died in circumstances which caused the coroner's jury some doubts. She was spending a lot of time away from the house, but not on those London jaunts that used to be her way of escaping boredom. Here was a highly strung, pretty young woman, bored to tears by the country, until something comes along to interest her—if only temporarily. Doesn't that sound familiar, Anna?"

"The same as Cathy Bernstein," I said slowly.

Hugh nodded. "Yes. It's easy enough to see that a young American girl might be blinded into thinking Frank Harper genuine. Of course, it's very much more difficult to believe Julia Herington would be taken in by him. But it *is* possible. She was at loggerheads with her husband; she was bored and restless."

"Are you suggesting they might have had an affair? That's inconceivable." But then, with shocked dismay, I thought about Laura's diary. She had taken a reel of photographs. They had been landscape pictures, but two of them had distressed her. Why? What had the camera's sharp eye picked up? Shadowy figures lying in the grass? Blurred, but recognizable?

"I've something to show you, Hugh," I said. "Wait just a moment." I brought the diary downstairs and opened it at the appropriate page. "Read this, will you?"

I saw his expression change, as he read. He began to turn the pages, flicking over the weeks that followed the strange entry. Then he gave me a thoughtful look. "Have you found the photographs, Anna?"

I shook my head. "They're not with any of the others. but then, Laura would hardly have left them in one of the pigeonholes of the bureau."

"She might well have destroyed them, before she left here for the last time. Unless," Hugh added slowly, "she meant you to find them."

"Why on earth would she have wanted that?"

"Anna, remember the ending of that last Prince Hal book. I've been thinking about what you said, that the end of it was somehow ominous, almost suggesting that the story should by rights have had a tragic ending."

I watched him; his face was very serious.

"I'm inclined to believe your uneasiness was founded on more than the emotionalism I accused you of." He tapped the diary. "Let's suppose that when Laura finished the book, she was trying to do two things at once. Naturally, one was to round off the saga in a way that would be satisfactory to her young readers. The other might have been very different. Laura could have been trying to give her close friends —and you were the closest of all, Anna —a clue."

"A clue?" My throat was dry.

"An indication that a black cloud did indeed hang over someone she regarded as a prince. That his future happiness was threatened by something that had dogged him for a long time."

"Simon?" I asked unsteadily. "But if Laura suspected that Julia had been involved with Frank, surely she would have talked it out with Simon?"

"He had fled abroad, severed contact. And Laura was no determined sleuth. To ferret into what can only have been a rather grimy affair would have been extremely repugnant to her. The best she could do, as I see it, was to leave sufficient evidence for her dearest friend to step in and avert the continuation of Herington's misery by searching for the truth, before it was too late."

Rather roughly he added, "She *did* choose to give the story a happy ending, after all. She wanted her prince to find happiness."

"Hugh, we have no real evidence," I said.

"Have you finished going through the diaries?"

I shook my head. "I'd got as far as this one when you came back."

"Then fetch the others," Hugh said. "We'll finish the job, here and now. There *must* be something else, Anna. If Laura wanted to clear things up, the diaries must be the answer."

The sun was beginning to drop behind the trees; the sky was red-gold, the air still and warm. Hugh and I were sitting in the garden, the pile of diaries in front of us on the table where Laura had so often worked. We were too exhausted to talk, too shattered by what we had learned.

Suddenly I heard footsteps on the path that led 'round from the house. Simon stood there, looking at us. His face was drawn and haggard. I thought I saw something flare momentarily in his eyes at the sight of the two of us sitting so companionably together. When he spoke, his voice was flat.

"I'm sorry to invade your privacy. I knocked on the door, but no one answered. I thought you would like to know that the police have caught Harper."

Hugh sprang up. "Thank God for that! It must be a tremendous weight off your mind."

"It was only a matter of time." Simon sounded weary. "But yes, I'm glad, for Cathy's sake. She's been in a state of hysteria all day. Delayed shock, of course. Quite to be expected."

"Had Harper got far?"

"He was found with a disreputable friend of his, who lives about twenty miles from here." Simon came forward and sat on the wooden bench, a little removed from us.

"So Harper will be charged now! Assault, presumably." Hugh leaned across and patted my hand. "You'll have to give evidence, I suppose, Anna. That won't be very pleasant for you."

I was too concerned for Simon to be thinking of myself. If Hugh weren't there, I would have put a comforting arm around his shoulders. I kept thinking that if Cathy had been harmed, much of the blame would have fallen—again—on Simon. And the whole terrible pattern would have been repeated. I suddenly knew what I had to do.

"I need to talk to Millie. It's time everything was brought out into the open."

"But it has been." Simon frowned. "Harper has been taken into custody."

"It's the past that concerns me, not the present," I said. Simon gave me a baffled look. Helplessly I said to him, "Oh, Simon, I'm sorry I can't tell you what this is all about, but I promise you'll be the first to know, if I can get Millie to talk."

"Do you want me to come with you?" Hugh had got up and was looking intently at me.

"No. She's been frightened enough by all the police. She won't talk at all if there are strangers present. I'm not at all sure she'll say anything to *me*, but while she's still off balance she just might."

"Will you show her the photographs?" Hugh asked.

"I hope it won't be necessary, but I'll take them."

I picked up the last of the diaries. That was where Laura had kept them, those incriminating pictures. She had stuck a sheet of white card inside the back cover and slipped them behind it.

"Good luck, Anna." Hugh's eyes searched mine. "This isn't going to be easy for you, but I know it's what Laura wanted. She would be very proud."

"For God's sake, what is going on?" Simon was staring at me as though I had gone out of my mind. "What has Laura to do with the Harper business?"

"Everything," I said unsteadily. "And when I know the answers, Simon, you shall have them." Then, because my courage was beginning to fail me, caught as I was between those two pairs of demanding eyes, I turned and fled.

Millie was a long time coming to the door and I thought for a moment that she was going to close it in my face, but I stepped forward and into the house before she could shut me out.

"Mrs. Harper, I need to talk to you." I controlled my voice, although I was shaking.

"I've been expecting you," came the surprising answer. The woman's voice was dull. "Frank always said you was the one to watch, the one as would stir it all up and make trouble for him!"

"He's done that without any help

from me," I said.

"I warned him," she said, as if I hadn't spoken. "I told him not to mess around with that American girl, but he wouldn't listen. I suppose he knew it was all going to come out anyway, now as you're at the cottage. Any day now you'd have gone running to Mr. Herington with them photographs. Frank was all right, so long as Laura was alive. She never had the nerve to let on that she knew. Too wrapped up in her fairy stories," she said with a touch of the old malice.

"It was quite obvious to me, from the beginning," I said, "that your grandson had been involved with Julia Herington." I told the lie boldly. "How long had they been having an affair?"

She shrugged. "On and off for about six months. Really had him on a string, she did! Wicked, I call her, taking advantage of her position the way she did, giving Frank the come-on one minute and putting him down the next. It's her I blame, not him!"

Well, yes, she would, I reflected grimly! "Frank saw Laura take the photographs, of course?"

"Frank was worried, at first, but after a bit he realized she wasn't going to show them to Mr. Herington. He felt safe enough after that, what with Mr. Herington going off to America the way he did. Only then *you* had to come down here and start digging about through all the stuff Laura left."

"Frank broke into the cottage, didn't he, to look for the pictures?"

She gave me a sharp look. "How did you know that?"

"He's not a very good burglar," I said shortly. "Things had been moved."

"How much have you told Mr. Herington?" she wanted to know. I could see that she was frightened.

"Nothing yet." Seeing a glimmer of hope in her eyes I went on, sternly. "I want all the facts first. The facts about the night Julia died."

"Suicide, it was. That's what the court said." She spoke quickly.

"But they didn't have all the facts, did they?" I stood up, glad of the fact that I was taller than she was. "They didn't know, for a start, that Julia had been involved with your grandson."

"She kept threatening Frank—acted like a crazy woman, he said. Kept saying she was going to tell Simon about him, and that would keep him at home. She kept on at Frank that night, taunting him."

So Frank had been with Julia on the night that she died! When had he left her? I tried not to let any emotion show. "Where did they spend the evening?"

"In the boathouse, same as usual. At first she was nice as pie to Frank, but then she began to turn mean and call him names. He said he wasn't going to stay there with her if she went on that way, but all of a sudden she was crying and begging him on her knees not to leave her alone. Making such a din, Frank was scared somebody might hear."

"So that's why he suggested going out in the boat?" My throat was dry.

"Well, she liked going on the lake. She said it was fun, especially at night in the dark." A violent shudder ran through the woman. "He didn't ought to have taken her, though, not that time. She'd had a lot to drink, and she was acting funny, and you've got to sit still in a boat. She got this daft idea about picking water lilies, and he said no, because she would have wanted to take them back to the house, and that would have been a real giveaway. She went off her rocker, Frank told me. Began trying to grab the oars, and the boat was rocking, and the next thing he knew, she was in the water. He looked for her, but there wasn't any light. So in the end he had to give up. As it was, he only just made it himself. He was half dead by the time he got back here. Soaked to the skin, he was, and a face like I never want to see again!"

She sat down in a chair by the fireplace. She began to rock backward and forward, her own face ghastly. "That letter to her husband was a real piece of luck. She'd had been writing it when Frank tapped on the window, but he didn't know what it was at the time."

So there it was! Everything I had come to find out. Somehow I got out of the room and along the passage that led to the front door. I half ran down the short garden path and turned along the road that led back to the village street. I didn't even see the car parked on the other side of the road, and if Simon called my name, I didn't hear him. I was vaguely aware of the slam of a door, but it wasn't until he took me by the arm that I realized he was there.

"Anna, are you all right?" His eyes were dark with anxiety.

"Simon, it was an accident! Julia's death was an accident!" And then Simon had pulled me into his arms and was holding me very tightly.

"My dear love, Lincoln told me. I bludgeoned it out of him. And you're not to worry. Whatever the Harper woman had to say, I can accept it, so long as it hasn't hurt *you*. That's the important thing, don't you understand? That you shouldn't upset yourself any more, because I can't bear it. Oh, Anna, I do love you so very much, and I can't stand to see you in this state!"

He released his grip and turned my face up to his own. There was a tenderness in his expression that brought the tears flooding at last to my eyes. "Tell me there's hope for me, Anna. That in time you might find it possible to care for me."

"Care?" I had been through too much to make a decorous answer. Words just spilled out of me. "Simon, I love you! I've been fighting against it almost from the beginning, because I thought it could never work. You started by resenting me for taking over the cottage. Then, when I came to know you better, it seemed to me that after what you'd been through you would never be willing to trust your happiness to another woman."

We were outside the cottage now. Quietly Simon reached for the ignition key and turned it off. Everything was very still. A few birds, startled by the arrival of the car, darted across Laura's garden, but they settled again to their evening song.

"I *did* feel like that for a long time. If I hadn't met you, Anna, I could have gone on living like a hermit. But you forced me to face life again, and I thank God for it."

He lifted my hand and put it to his lips. "Anna, I love you dearly. If you will agree to be my wife, I shall be the happiest man alive."

EPILOGUE

Simon walked into the room which he'd had converted into a studio for me. As always, he took a quick look to make sure I wasn't engrossed in some fine detail requiring my total concentration. But I had all but finished and was sitting back studying the final illustration.

"A letter from Cathy," he said cheerfully. "She says Switzerland is 'fabulous' and that she could stay there forever, but she promises to be in Paris for the concert. Then she's coming to London. It seems Hugh Lincoln is still after her for a job with his firm. But here, read it for yourself." He laid the letter on my work table and then, putting a hand on my shoulder, studied the picture I had been working on.

"So the evil spirit has finally been destroyed, and the prince wins his lady!" He caressed my neck gently. "I wonder whether Laura guessed how things would turn out, Anna? I hope so."

"I can't get her out of my mind," I confessed. "I have this queer feeling that she's somewhere close, as though she senses our happiness. Is that very foolish of me, Simon?"

He shook his head. "I feel it, too. But then, I always have done. In certain places, particularly. Places that she loved. The little woods, behind Vine Cottage. And up there, of course." He gestured through the open door, looking up toward the gallery. "She spent a lot of time studying the family portraits," Simon said. "His in particular. I never spoke to her about it. I felt that if she wanted me to know more, she would choose the time to tell me."

"And so she has," I said.

Laura had, indeed, chosen her own time to reveal everything to Simon—and to me—in her own cryptic fashion. There had been one final revelation in her diaries—the one that truly resolved the story of The Winter Prince.

At the back of her most recent journal, behind the photographs, we had found instructions to a hidden drawer in the bureau, which was opened by a spring lever at the back of the top drawer. In it we found more love poems—and, more significantly, her diary of the war years.

For Laura, we discovered, there had been two princes. the first had been Henry Herington, the original "Prince Hal." They had been wildly in love during those frightening years, when so many loved ones were being lost all around them. They agreed—against Hal's family's wishes—to marry as soon as the war was over. The love poems were signed with his private insignia. But the story of Laura's own prince came to a horrible end just weeks before he was due home for good. By then Laura knew that she was carrying his child. And the child would be her second "Winter Prince"—Simon.

Martin Herington had strongly opposed Hal's affair with Laura. "You mustn't put ideas into Laura's head," he had told Hal. "She a nice enough girl, but the Andersons are hardly in our class." But when Hal died, Martin was tormented by remorse. "If only I had known," he told Laura. "There was so little time left for him—for you both. And I was so narrow and blind. Forgive me."

He offered to make the baby his heir. Laura decided to accept, but to stay out of the child's life, to lessen the conflict he might have growing up. Their bond, however, was natural and one that, unconsciously at least, Simon had always been sure of. He had barely seemed surprised when we made the discovery. He seemed, instead, to be simply relieved.

"With the truth," he said taking me in his arms, "our life can really begin. I loved my adoptive parents," he told me then. "But I always felt more comfortable with Laura, as though, somehow, she knew my heart. It turns out that she did. And, as if by magic, she led me to you."

"That final illustration of yours," Simon said now. "What were you thinking about while you were working on it? I've watched you sometimes, and there has been a strange expression on your face."

"I've thought of the dark cloud that hung over *your* life for such a long time," I told him, rubbing his hand against my cheek. "Of how lucky we are."

"Yes, we have everything, you and I," Simon said. "You have your painting. I have the music I thought I could never return to. Most wonderful of all, we have each other. Laura was less lucky. For her, and for *her* prince, there was the evil cloud of war, which in the end took Hal away from her forever."

I remembered, then, my conviction that the book had been forced to a happy ending, almost against its author's own wishes. "Poor Laura!" I was not far from tears.

"She wouldn't want you to say that. She never pitied herself. She lived through her grief and found happiness in idealizing her prince and making him immortal. She would have been very happy for *us*."

It was true. Laura had hoped for it, planned it, made the way possible. She had brought my prince out of his darkness.

I turned to my husband. "Nothing will ever come between us, will it, Simon?"

"There is nothing in the world that has the power to do that," he answered me.

Suddenly I knew how to paint the wondering, radiant smiles of the prince and the girl it had taken him so long to win. Those were the final details, and then the work would be finished.

Hugh will stare up at me in bewilderment when he looks at that last picture.

"Anna, you've done something to their faces. I don't know quite what, but they're different, somehow!"

And I shall just smile at him without answering, because Hugh is no fool, and he only has to look at me to know that love changes mere mortals into princes, and that it has the power to banish winter from the human heart forever.

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ECHO AND NARCISSUS

A Cameo Legend

I give you my heart . . . my heart . . .
my heart, she cried. But Narcissus could
love only himself

By Leora M. Sies

Echo may not have been the prettiest of the nymphs, but she certainly was the most talkative. She talked incessantly to her sister nymphs, the oreads, and to the satyrs and centaurs who roamed the woods and fields near Mount Olympus. When no one was near to hear her, she chatted with the birds and even with the river reeds that rustled in the breeze.

"Someday that wagging tongue of yours will surely get you into trouble," the goddess Artemis warned her one afternoon, when Echo's prattle scared away a buck pursued in the hunt by the goddess and her entourage of nymphs and maidens.

The goddess's prophetic warning was in vain, however, for Echo merely continued to chatter gaily on, amusing all those about her. Finally, even sober-faced Artemis of the silver bow had to smile at the amicable little nymph.

That evening as Echo and her sisters were dancing in the meadow, a dark cloud of silver and gold appeared in the heavens above them. It was Hera, queen of all the gods. The other nymphs were frightened, but not Echo.

"Great goddess, what honor you bestow upon us with your visit. Come join us so we may gossip together and while away an hour or two," Echo chirped happily.

"I have no time for gossip," Hera replied darkly, as she knit her brows in a foreboding manner. "I am here to seek information that you and your sister nymphs surely must know. Now, tell me, who among Artemis's maidens has caught the eye of my husband, Zeus?"

For a moment Echo was rendered speechless, but only for a moment. She knew that Zeus favored the maiden Callisto, who served Artemis faithfully, but Echo realized that Callisto would be doomed if she imparted this information to Hera. So, instead, she laughed and clapped her hands before her.

"Oh, great Hera, it is not I, for I love only Narcissus, the son of the river god Cephissus. And, oh, how handsome he is! He would capture any nymph's heart, you know. His eyes are as purple as summer skies at midnight, and his hair is so fair that it is the color of the morning moon," Echo babbled on breathlessly. "But, alas, Narcissus has taken a vow that he will never give away his heart, so I am forced to love him from afar. Even so, I am forever hopeful. The god Pan, himself, loves me, but I will have none of him for I love Narcissus and only he, although my love for him may be forever unrequited."

"Perhaps I can help you," Hera replied craftily. She fingered the embroidered fringe on her chiton, and gazed across the meadow at a grove of laurel trees, toward which the other nymphs were hurriedly retreating.

"Great Hera, if only you could help me," Echo said, her heart filling with hope.

"Yes, I vow Narcissus will return your love, if you will tell me who has captured my husband's heart," Hera answered, her piercing eyes ominously dark.

Echo's chattering tongue almost betrayed her, but she bit her lip in time, and said nothing. As much as she wanted Narcissus's love, she could not betray Callisto.

When Hera saw that Echo would tell her nothing, her rage was something horrible to see. The other nymphs had disappeared into the laurel grove, leaving Echo alone to bear the brunt of Hera's fury.

"You dare defy me, do you?" Hera cried. "Then this is your punishment. From this day forth your chattering tongue will only be able to have the last word, but no power to speak first. This I decree!"

With that, Hera disappeared in a fiery flash of light, leaving Echo alone and afraid in the meadow. Seeing that the fiercesome goddess was no longer with their sister, the other nymphs returned to Echo's side.

"Echo, what has happened?" they asked when they saw her tears.

Echo shook her head and mutely pointed to her tongue.

The nymphs looked at each other in amazement and said, "Echo cannot speak!"

"—cannot speak," Echo repeated as she nodded her head forlornly.

"You must go at once to Narcissus," they said. "Surely, he will take pity on you and give you comfort."

Echo ran through the woods to the river bank where she knew she would find Narcissus. But when she saw him, she suddenly felt shy and afraid. Since she knew she could not speak to him, she hid behind the trees and watched silently.

Sensing the presence of someone nearby, Narcissus turned and asked, "Is anyone here?"

"—here . . . here," Echo called back in rapture. Stepping forth from the woods, she approached Narcissus with outstretched arms.

"No!" he exclaimed, when he saw who it was. "I will die before I give you power over me."

"—I give you power over me . . . me . . . me," Echo humbly entreated.

"You will *never* have me," Narcissus replied.

"—have me . . . me . . . me!" Echo begged, able only to

Illustrated by Leora M. Sies

repeat his last words.

"I will *never* give you my love," Narcissus said as he pushed her gently away.

"—my love . . . love . . . love," Echo called sadly after him. Falling to the ground, she watched in despair while Narcissus stalked away into the forest.

Echo's sister nymphs could not believe how cruelly Narcissus had acted and how he had shunned Echo. Calling up to Nemesis, the goddess of righteous anger, they prayed that Echo be avenged and that Narcissus feel what it was to love and meet no return of affection.

Echo still loved Narcissus, and she wanted no harm to befall him, but since she no longer had the gift of free speech, she could do nothing to stop the curse Nemesis put upon him.

Fearfully she watched as Narcissus approached the river and bent to drink, for she knew what Nemesis had done. When Narcissus saw his reflection in the water, he immediately fell in love with his own image.

"Ah," he sighed, "now I know why Echo wanted my heart."

"—my heart . . . heart," Echo cried to him as she tugged at his arm.

But Narcissus would not be distracted from gazing fondly at his reflection. Day and night he sat at the water's edge, languished by his own image. Echo brought him berries and fruit from the woods, but he would not be diverted.

He spoke to his reflection and tried to embrace it. Slowly, he pined away until he became only a mere shadow of himself. One morning, when Echo came to see him, she found nothing but his impression on the grass where he had been sitting.

Seeing Echo's despair and unhappiness, the nymphs were sorry for what they had done. They mourned the handsome Narcissus and smote their breasts. Echo smote hers also and repeated the lamentations of her sisters.

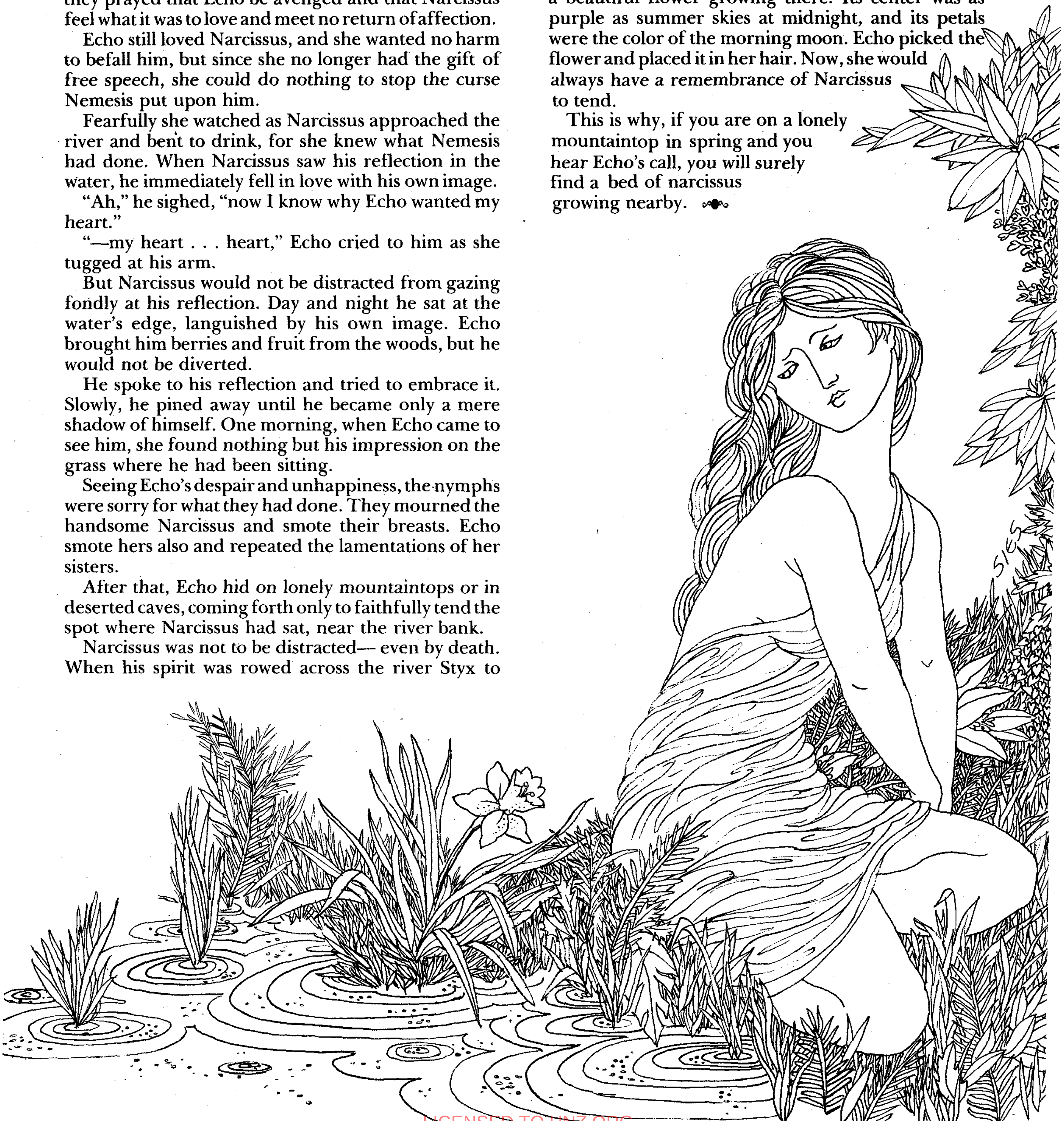
After that, Echo hid on lonely mountaintops or in deserted caves, coming forth only to faithfully tend the spot where Narcissus had sat, near the river bank.

Narcissus was not to be distracted— even by death. When his spirit was rowed across the river Styx to Hades, he leaned over the side of the boat to catch one last glimpse of himself in the dark waters.

Once he arrived in Hades, he began to think differently, however. He remembered Echo's loyalty to him and the love she had bestowed upon him. Repenting, he strove to give her in death what he had not given her in life.

All winter Echo tended the patch of earth that had held Narcissus. Then, suddenly, in the spring she saw a beautiful flower growing there. Its center was as purple as summer skies at midnight, and its petals were the color of the morning moon. Echo picked the flower and placed it in her hair. Now, she would always have a remembrance of Narcissus to tend.

This is why, if you are on a lonely mountaintop in spring and you hear Echo's call, you will surely find a bed of narcissus growing nearby.



Betwixt the Princess and the Witch

(Continued from page 12)

storm all around her, she fell prey once again to the same impish brownie who had betrayed her on that Sabbath morning weeks before. Straight from the highland glens he flicked a tune into her head. In the mood she was in, Margaret could not resist it. And who was to hear in such a storm? So wild and sweet it was, and so carried away was she, that she did not notice when the storm quit.

Next thing she knew, she heard the resonant and profoundly angry voice of James McHugh. "What heathen music is this?"

Margaret stopped, cold as the Queen of the North. "I did not mean harm," she whispered.

"You had best quit playing for today, Miss Stuart."

Margaret was no longer cold. She was hot with shame. "I had best quit for good," she cried. "I know I am not fit to play in the kirk. I—I had best marry Angus and leave Stoniebrae. Then you can get an organist who will please you!"

To her amazement he sprang at her, grasped her shoulders and shook until she was limp and trembling. "Then go!" he said.

Margaret fled up the aisle and through the door. Outside, rain still dripped from the trees like falling tears. She clung to the kirkyard gate, striving to get her breath. Everything she loved was lost—the organ, Stoniebrae, James McHugh. What to do? What to do? God help me, she prayed.

And then it came to her. Was there anything more satisfying to an earnest young minister than to forgive a penitent lamb? She must be meek and sorrowful. It would not hurt to remind him that she had been deprived of a mother's tender care at an early age. She left the tears to glisten in her eyes and opened the kirk door with unsteady hands. She must not fail. Even though he was lost to her, he might still let her play the organ and stay in Stoniebrae.

She never forgot how beautiful the inside of the kirk was with the sun shining radiantly now, streaming light in through the windows onto the wooden pews. And at the front, James McHugh knelt with his head bowed in his hands. A light more radiant than the sun's touched Margaret's heart, and she saw him in that moment not as a man to be won over but as a man to love no matter what.

He had heard her. He stood up. "Margaret, come here."

She went toward him fearfully.

"Margaret, what can I say? Can you ever forgive me?"

She had never heard his voice like this. He was apologizing to her!

"Since I was a lad I have struggled with my terrible temper. I had no right to hurt you."

"You did," she said. "I should not have played such music in the kirk."

"It was not the music which made me lose my temper."

What then? She could not imagine.

He took a deep breath. "I thought I knew you well. I considered you a good, true lass. I have thought of. . . ." He stopped as if at a loss for words and then demanded, "How could you marry Angus McHaggerty, a man you do not love?"

So that was why he had shaken her! "I've no mind to marry Angus, but father says I should. And he does have a job waiting for him in Edinburgh, and—and—" her voice trembled. "There is no one else for me to wed." Her eyes filled with tears.

"Ay, there is!" She feared he meant to shake her again, but this time his hands were gentle on her shoulders. "You can stay in Stoniebrae and marry me." His eyes searched hers. "Will you, Margaret?"

The wonder of the love glowing in his eyes was answer to her daftest dreams. And when he kissed her, she was delighted to perceive that he was very human indeed.

So Prince Charming and the witch were married and lived happily ever after (most of the time, that is), for he was the strong, firm man she needed to steady her, but with enough of the wildness of the highlands in his blood that they understood each other very well.

Now that it is all written down, I see what I should have before. It was not a brash brownie who muddled things at all, but a wise and knowing angel.

The Ghost of Lady Blanche de Varenne

(Continued from page 21)

It was in fact impossible to keep the situation secret. One by one, Blanche's ladies-in-waiting found out about the lovers. Then the pages got wind of it, then the heralds and the cooks, until finally the only people no one dared tell were Lord de Varenne—and of course Sir Gilbert, himself.

It was the evening before Good Friday, and Rolfe de Capo and Blanche de Varenne met at their usual place on the battlements. From there they went to the tiny private turret in which they held their trysts. Blanche had draped the small chamber with beautiful cloth brought back by the crusaders from the Levant. Deep rugs covered the floor and the room was scented with strange, exotic spices from the Holy Land. A candle flickered in a niche, covered by a shield of horn, and an oriental lamp burning perfumed oil hung from the vaulted ceiling.

Here they could be alone together and were safe from prying eyes and gossiping tongues. This was their home, their kingdom, in which they could give full rein to the passionate fires that consumed them. How Blanche loved this little tower chamber, high up above the rolling plains covered in darkness. All around them lay the night; thick, black, impenetrable, wrapping the bright flame of their love in a cloak of secrecy.

On this particular night, Blanche looked around nervously, as if she expected a sudden intrusion.

"Rolfe, my love," she said, "I am so afraid."

"There is no need to be, my sweet," he said. "No one can hurt us here."

"I don't mean here," she replied, "I am thinking of what people are saying about us."

"Saying?"

"Yes. Have you not noticed the look in people's eyes? Haven't you seen them huddled together whispering in corners? Even my maids stop talking when I come into the room."

"So what does it matter?" he said laughing. "You are a young bride on the verge of marriage. There is likely to be much prattle among your maids."

"Yes, but there is something disturbing in their tone, something reproachful in their looks."

"Think no more of it, my love. It is just idle gossip."

"But what about Gilbert? Do you think he suspects?" she asked.

Rolfe laughed grimly. "Each day he describes to me his passion for you. And even if you told him everything to his face, he would never believe you."

Blanche wanted to believe Rolfe, but she was not so sure that Gilbert was as unsuspecting as he seemed. Then her thoughts darkened. "What about my father?" she said. "Suppose he finds out?"

Rolfe drew her close to him.

"You know he has spies everywhere," she whispered.

"No, he knows nothing."

"How can we be sure, though? He always knows everything!"

Rolfe embraced her tightly and she could hear his heart beating, strong and sure. Finally she was comforted and thought only of the night of love that lay ahead of them. . . .

Toward morning a breeze sprang up, rustling the Oriental hangings, and Blanche started as if she had been struck. The wind began to moan through the narrow slit in the thick wall of the turret. She clung closer to de Capo and watched the shadow of the flickering candle play across the chamber. From far below on the plain came the sound of an owl hooting in the trees, followed by a burst of distant laughter from the tents of the besieging army. The hinges of the heavy door creaked slightly. Blanche looked up and noticed it was ajar.

Then to her horror she thought she saw a face in the strip of darkness at the open door. The face looked at her and she recognized it as Sir Gilbert de Clare. As her eyes met his, a terrible smile broke out on his face, full of wickedness and malice, and instantly she realized that he knew of her deception.

The vision lasted only a fraction of a second as Blanche let forth a scream and de Capo leapt to the door. But the apparition had vanished. From that moment on, Blanche lived in fear of her life.

Good Friday of the year 1264 marked the end of the siege at the castle. In a decisive action led by Lord Geoffrey de Varenne, the enemy was routed and the rebels put to flight. Lord Geoffrey and his men followed in hot pursuit, leaving Sir Gilbert de Clare to protect the castle.

Sir Rolfe de Capo, dressed in a magnificent suit of silver armor, followed Lord Geoffrey into the field, knowing that from the battlements Lady Blanche would be watching him. As he rode out onto the plain, he often looked back to see her. He looked forward to the coming of evening, when they would be together again in their secret tower.

Blanche was also thinking about their evening tryst, but her thoughts were full of foreboding. It seemed to her that, in spite of the injustice of an arranged marriage with Sir Gilbert, her love for de Capo was sinful and must be terminated forever. The wickedly grinning face she had seen in the open door the night before was constantly in her mind, so that even when she was at prayer, she felt threatened and afraid.

She was so absorbed in watching the maneuvers on the plain that she failed to notice the footsteps behind her. Suddenly feeling a cold, iron-clad hand upon her shoulder, she whirled around to see a knight in silver armor.

"Rolfe, my love!" she exclaimed, for who else would take such liberties? "I thought you were on the plain with the others!"

The knight raised his visor and with a gasp Blanche saw that it was not de Capo but Sir Gilbert de Clare.

He held her in a steely grip and his eyes blazed with anger.

"So it was true then," he whispered harshly. "You *have* been deceiving me."

"I am sorry," she said helplessly.

"Sorry!" he said, starting to shake her. "I'll make you sorry! I'll kill you, you harlot!"

His strong hands, clad in icy chain mail, slowly reached up toward Blanche's snowy white neck. She struggled desperately to free herself. She called vainly to de Capo below in the plain, but he was out of earshot.

"You have made a laughingstock of me," Gilbert said, tightening his grip. "And no one does that to me. You knew of my tenderness for you and you cast it into my teeth. You are unworthy of your father, unworthy of this house and unworthy of me!"

In his fury, Sir Gilbert would undoubtedly have strangled Blanche at that moment. But Sir Rolfe de Capo happened to look back up to the battlements of the castle and he saw what was going on. Immediately, he took his powerful longbow and aimed an arrow at the iron-clad figure that was attacking Lady Blanche. The arrow went whistling through the air and hit Sir Gilbet squarely on the chest. Then, instead of penetrating the suit of silver armor, it glanced off and plunged into the soft white breast of Lady Blanche de Varenne.

With a wild expresion of grief and terror, she walked a few steps along the battlements, her lips silently forming the question "Why? Why? Why? . . ." Then she sank to the ground, mortally wounded.

The legend has it the very same night her ghost was seen walking the battlements, her hair flowing in the wind, the fatal arrow buried in her breast, bemoaning her death at the hands of her lover.

◆

Editor's Note

Rochester, where this story takes place, is a city built within the walls of an ancient Roman town in Kent, England. Rochester Castle was built at the time of the Norman Conquest and is mentioned in Domesday Book (1086). The Castle standing today is the second castle, built over the ruins of the city's original keep. It was one of the first castles in Great Britain to be fortified in stone.

The Civil War, called The Barons' War, was waged between Henry III and the supporters of Earl Simon de Montford. Rochester Castle was defended in the name of the King. The insurgents were repulsed as the troops of the King and his son Lord Edward advanced to join forces with the castle's defenders. It was during this battle that Lady Blanche met her cruel fate.

The ghost of Lady Blanche de Varenne was seen on the night of her death and is said to appear each Good Friday. Dressed in white robes, she walks the battlements with her raven hair flying behind her. Her robe is stained red where an arrow is embedded in her breast. Sometimes her footsteps are heard heralding her approach; at other times she glides silently. All who have seen the ghost of Lady Blanche de Varenne have described the look of terror and bewilderment on her face.

Visitors may tour the Castle year round. The British Tourist Authority, 680 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10020, telephone 212-581-4700, will provide information on request. Lady Blanche's ghost is one of the most authenticated hauntings in England. Books dedicated to ghost documentation give detailed descriptions of her appearances.

the Misfit

(*Continued from page* 26)

Business. Pushy creditors, the bank putting a stop on the overdraft, stocks bought on margin in a falling market—she had seen it all so often—and fixed it up and helped to make a go of it so often, too. She walked on, dreaming of the kiss.

She intended to phone one or two useful people from the office next day, but barely had time to change into the neat suit before the boss sent her scurrying off.

"Off you go," he ordered. "It's some engineering fellow, name of John Newalls. Called me yesterday—bank's going to foreclose. Go and see what's what. Take the Rolls!"

Heart leaping, Eva fled. To help John. It was a marvelous chance to come out in her true colors at last. Perhaps even to get his business back on its feet, so that he could—so that he—

"You!" cried John Newalls, aghast.

"Sorry," she answered crisply. "I *am* qualified; and I've done a lot of insolvency work. Let's have your last balance sheet."

"He said he'd send his expert."

"He has."

She looked round the bright little office. "I'll want a desk and a phone, and the person who knows where everything is will have to be on hand. Coffee at eleven, please. Who's your bank contact?"

"You never told me you did this kind of thing. Wasn't I supposed to know?"

His face, normally so open and happy, showed suspicion. With sudden dread she realized what he must be thinking. She was a fraud. Either she wasn't the girl in way-out clothes who ran for the train with him, or she wasn't the qualified professional who was flipping through his books. One or the other. Disapproval of her deception was written in his very stance.

She paused. "I was going to tell you. It's because of Dad and Mom. I'll explain it all—"

"You don't have to," he answered, wearily. "Will this desk do?"

So he really was hurt. But no wonder. What confidence could he have in her?

With panic fluttering in her breast, she began to say, "John—" but he interrupted.

"Oh! Our banker—someone called Bruce Busby. Sounds like a crony of yours."

The implied sneer shut her up. "I've met him," she said, subdued, and settled down to prepare a statement and a cash flow forecast.

She worked through the books with the nagging consciousness that the man she had deceived was waiting aloof, impersonal, for her to finish the job and go.

"Right," she said at two o'clock that afternoon, "we'll go and see this man Busby. I'll tell you one thing, John—if you can get the cash to tide you over the next three months you've got a rattling good little business here."

"If," said John, moodily, but there was renewed life in his tone as he telephoned for the appointment.

In a gloss of mahogany Bruce Busby received them with his usual sardonic smile.

"Shirley Temple strikes again!" he said.

"Tell me, who's taking your place here, Bruce?" she asked silkily.

"No one is taking my place here, Eva."

"Even though you're turning good customers away? I can't see you lasting very long. Did you buy those stocks I told you about?"

"They've shown an unexpected spurt—upward."

"So when I put you on to another good thing, like Mr. John Newalls's little gold mine here, you'll want to listen? You'll want to respond generously?"

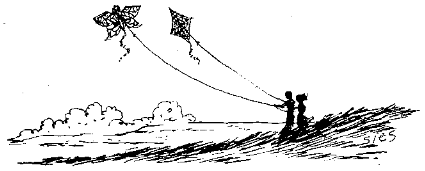
"Well now, as to that—" Bruce hedged, "Perhaps you've got some up-to-date figures?"

She had. They sat around the table and looked over the papers she produced: sales and profit projections, cash-flow charts, stock levels, trends, extrapolations. He began to waver.

"I'm sticking my neck out," he complained. "For how long?"

"One year will do. Look at the graph."

"Okay," he agreed, "you've got yourself a sale. We'll see you through, Mr. Newalls. And now you had better take this ball of fire out and buy her a coke. She's earned it."



"Would you care for a coke, Eva?"

There are two ways of offering a girl a coke: One is to grab her dynamically by the hand and cry, "Let's go and get a coke," in which case a girl goes, bright-eyed.

The other way, John's way, was to say it coolly, like a man who recognizes his obligations and is prepared to grit his teeth and carry them out.

"No thanks," said Eva. Her eyes were dull.

They made their way back toward his office.

"I had no idea you were a professional women, and so very competent. I'm grateful for all you've done."

"Not at all."

"I'll see that your boss hears of it."

"Thank you." They were at his door.

"Your other act is very competent, too. I don't quite know the reason for it, but I'm sure everyone is taken in. I certainly was. I must apologize for the kiss."

"Oh, John, no!"

"You must have enjoyed some quiet laughs. Goodbye."

He marched away.

"I love you!" she cried, and heard the door slam.

Unwomanly she was to the last, and a failure. How right her parents had been! *Fail if you must, magnificiently,* her mother had advised: but there was nothing magnificent about this.

Swallowing back the tears, she returned to the bosom of her family. Her mind was obsessed with John. Out on the lawn, in the hot afternoon sun, she held the pose as Drooping Flower for her mother for an hour and a half with no trouble.

"Another ten minutes," said her mother, standing back, paintbrushes aloft, and trampling the smashed rockgarden stones into the ground, "and I'm done."

Round the corner of the house came John, a frown of resolution on his face as he accosted Eva.

"You said, 'I love you!'"

"Yes."

"I love you, too. It's just come to me."

"For heaven's sake," said her mother, too immersed in painting to notice the conversation, "Droop. Can't you droop?"

"I'm afraid not," said Eva, disappointing her mother for the last time and gazing mistily at John. ❧

STRUGGLE FOR PARADISE

A
CAMEO
NOVEL

(Continued from page 18)

"Shh," Heather whispered back, "Miss Devane will make us leave if we're noisy."

For six weeks now, Sarah had been mentioning the young Italian daily and just as frequently, Heather made a derogatory remark in return. Heather had confided this one difference of opinion with Sarah to her mother. Mrs. Norton, without so much as raising an eyebrow, said something vague about puppy love and cloistered Quakers. Her advice had been to ignore Sarah's comments. Without opposition, Sarah would lose interest.

Heather pulled out her new watch, a present for her recent birthday, and checked its face. "It's nearly five," she said and then saw Sarah's longing look. "Oh, I wish Mother could give you a watch, too," she said impulsively, their disagreement forgotten. "But Friends are still so angry about the piano lessons she gave you that I don't think it would be a very wise thing to do right now."

"I know," Sarah agreed quietly. "Father hasn't yet recovered from being called in front of men's meeting for questioning about it. It's getting late, and I really must go to the store to help Father before closing. I like working there. It makes me feel that I'm helping rather than hurting him."

Sarah hugged Heather fondly and crossed the pike to the stone building on the corner. She smiled politely at the few customers clustered around the food scales. Sarah's favorite job was working with figures, checking the ledger with its tallies and credit coupons. Immersed this way, she listened only to the more interesting pieces of information being exchanged.

"Yup, that Italian boy, of all people. They say he's always been different from the rest of them folk."

Sarah looked up from the ledger, startled.

"Not content with his pasta and pretty little girls, huh?"

Little guffaws came from the other men in the group as Sarah quickly buried her head in the ledger, trying to look deep in her work and hoped that a telltale blush wouldn't give her away.

Whispered words and phrases reached her ear. "Chemist in Providence . . . going away soon . . . taking food right out of our mouths . . . job like that belongs to real . . . wonder why that fella at Brown would want one of those . . ."

Sarah strained but could hear no more as the knot of men drifted apart to gather their purchases and leave the store.

"What was all that gossip about today, Father?" Sarah asked as Francis locked the front door before they turned to walk home.

"What is thy sudden interest in gossip?"

"Father, it's such a small village. I do like to know what's going on."

"Something about one of the mill boys, a rather bright boy, being asked to work with a chemist or scientist of some kind at the university in Providence."

"Brown University?"

"Yes."

"Who?" Sarah tried not to sound impatient with him.

"Hill or something like that," Francis replied absentmindedly.

"Why, that's not an Italian name," she exclaimed.

"No, that's the name of the professor. It's strange this Ghiberti boy should be so honored coming from his background, although I'll be the first to admit that he's not cut from the same cloth as the rest of his family."

"Which one, Father? Which Ghiberti?" Sarah asked, already knowing the answer.

"Carlo, the one thee has taken to exchanging pleasantries with lately."

So her father had noticed, Sarah realized without surprise. Ever since that last business meeting when he was called to task about her behavior, she had the feeling he was following her movements more closely.

"A pleasant boy," Sarah said offhandedly, glad that the descending darkness hid the flush on her cheeks.

"Man," Francis corrected promptly. He hoped his daughter would note both the distinction and warning he had made with this one word. He sighed inwardly, relieved that this young man, by divine intercession it would seem, was being removed from the village. Sarah was fast approaching the age when her interest should turn toward the eligible Quaker men in the conclave. It was dangerous, especially for someone with Sarah's temperament, to have contact with outsiders.

Friend Comstock, thee realizes why we are here today," Teacher Abigail began, concern showing in her eyes for her old pupil.

"Thy dear friends present today have been appointed by the meeting to labor with thee on matters of great concern. The meeting lovingly considers thee a woman now that thee has reached nineteen years. Thus, we are not approaching thy father as in the past, but thee directly."

Sarah sat stiffly on the edge of the parlor chair and managed to move her head in acknowledgment of Abigail's words. She knew how difficult it must be for these three women since they came without malice in their hearts.

She couldn't help but feel that this meeting today was futile. Her offenses over the years had long since made their mark on the members of Fairview Meeting, although most bore them in silence well enough. Her pranks and gaiety had diminished as she grew out of childhood, but certain faults, anathemical to Friends, had come to light as she approached maturity.

They feel I am flawed, Sarah admitted inwardly. *Now there's nothing left except to take the initiative and help us all through this dreadful encounter.*

"Friend Worthington," Sarah spoke quietly, certain of her direction and duty. "Thee would like to say something?"

"Yes," Ann replied, glad to see Sarah looking more sure of herself. "I must ask thee straightforwardly. Are the rumors that have reached us true regarding thy attendance at St. Thomas Church last Sunday? And is it true that thee also attended, unchaperoned, a dance at that same church with a young man who is not a Friend?"

Sarah sat erect, her eyes and voice clear and steady. "Yes, Ann Worthington, I did attend the Presbyterian services but only after I had been to our meeting for worship. And I did go to a chaperoned dance at St. Thomas Hall in the company of Heather Norton, Roger Claypool and Barry Townsend."

Sarah hoped that she sounded neither penitent nor belligerent. She knew when she chose to go with Heather to her church and, later to the dance, her actions wouldn't go unheeded or without reprimand. She hadn't actively sought to bring disgrace on her family or disownment on herself. At one point not long ago, she had diligently tried to attend meeting twice a week, entertain Friends, and even let that lumpish dolt, Moses Waddington, court her in his fashion. But the more she pleased others, the less happy she herself became. Life had begun to take on the somber quality and coloring of her sect. Rebellion, however dangerous, seemed a vast improvement on this slow, waking death by boredom. So she changed her decorous walk to a contradance-step in the halls of the Presbyterian church, and today these Friends sat before her, trying not to judge but needing to do just that to justify the righteousness of their own lives.

"Thee feels no remorse, Friend Comstock, and would act thus again." Teacher Abigail made the statement in a voice devoid of emotion.

"If the occasion warranted," Sarah answered honestly. "For I choose a different sort of life."

She spoke with the blind optimism of one not yet twenty years of age. And months later, the Quaker conclave still hummed with the oft-repeated words of Sarah's parting statement.

"I cannot judge thee for the life thee has chosen," she said softly before her disownment. "I wish that same consideration for myself. Friends have brought much good to the world. I, too, in my own way, will strive to do likewise. May my God and Thine bless us both."

Francis Comstock, by placing an advertisement in the Providence *Journal*, took the first step. With the meeting's disownment of his daughter, Francis had hardened his heart and sorrowfully followed God's will: His duty now was to remove Sarah from Friends. Francis was her father but he was an elder, too. He needed to find a good home with decent people to care for Sarah; away from the village she could follow her godless path without setting a bad example for the too few Quaker children within the meeting.

Confirming the rightness of his decision, both his prayers and his advertisement in the Providence paper were answered directly. Sarah was to live under the care of Albert and Nina Claxton in the city of Providence. Each month she was to receive a small allowance to purchase incidentals. Her room and board were to be provided in exchange for work in Albert Claxton's clothing store.

You have been so kind to me, Nina. I hate to burden you with yet another of my problems."

Sarah looked at the older woman sitting across the table from her leisurely sipping tea. Thin brown hair liberally sprinkled with gray framed her triangular-shaped face. Warm, intelligent eyes looked deeply back into Sarah's.

"I'd be lying, Sarah, if I said we haven't had difficult times over these past three years. On the other hand, you've given us so much. Our house is a happier place because of you. Don't forget that side of it."

"All right," Sarah sighed, looking less troubled. "You do have a way of putting my problems in perspective. Just when I'm convinced it's the end of the world, you show me that life goes on, whether I like it or not."

Nina's face broke into a generous smile and she impulsively leaned across the table to pat Sarah's hand.

"It wasn't always so. Remember when your father brought you here to live with us after that dreadful affair in your village? You looked at Albert and me as though we were the strangest creatures you had ever seen. You acted so cold and uncaring in front of your father and us, but we heard you sobbing every night."

Sarah's eyes clouded for an instant, then she smiled. Two months after she left she no longer needed her father's allowance and in what became the final communication between them, she had refused to accept his money.

"I didn't mean to mention past hurt," Nina said softly.

"It hurts less these days," Sarah answered. "That doesn't bother me as much as Phebe. She infuriates me with the way she lets Aunt Susanne tell her what to do and how to do it. The only time she stands up to her is over me—and I bet she pays for that dearly."

Nina listened carefully to the torrent of words and wondered again how a young woman with such passion and verve could have come from a family so bloodless. She and Albert had long since given up trying to persuade Francis Comstock to relent and visit his daughter.

Nina had found Sarah to be articulate and unafraid to voice her opinion from the very start of their friendship. As Sarah shared more of her previous life with them, Nina could only marvel at the resiliency of her character. The Claxtons had never been religious in any organized fashion and, after listening to Sarah, felt thankful. Without children or a church base, their social life was circumscribed, their contacts limited, but that hadn't bothered them much. They had chosen to be free of those roots dictating and proscribing their behavior, and they lived happily enough without affiliations of the religious kind.

"What's Phebe's problem now?" Nina asked.

"Aunt Susanne is going to make Phebe marry that dreadful Abram Lawson. You know that I can't talk with Aunt Susanne since she won't even allow me in her house. And Phebe just doesn't have the nerve to say no to her. She's terrified."

"Nonsense, Sarah. In this day and age, women don't have to marry against their wishes, especially someone Phebe's age." Nina leaned back in her chair before adding more cautiously, "I think it would be good for her. It would get her away from Susanne's influence, make her a little more independent."

"I'd better go back a ways to explain. Ever since I was sixteen, I've felt that there's something wrong with Phebe. Oh, it sounds so silly and stupid—" Sarah stopped speaking, suddenly embarrassed by her confession.

"Let me light a lamp before you continue. I hadn't realized it was so late," said Nina, busying herself with the lamps on the sideboard. Sarah was thankful for her quiet patience and when Nina sat once again, took a deep breath and tried to continue.

"It probably started around the time Mother died, although Phebe never said anything to me until years later. She blames Father for killing Mother through childbirth. I know how dumb that sounds but Phebe is firmly convinced it was all Father's doing, that he should have known the risk he was making Mother take. She couldn't see how awful it had been for Father, too—how it warped and changed his life for the worse."

Nina shifted her position slightly, encouraged by Sarah's growing understanding of her family and their actions. Perhaps Sarah's pain and confusion over being rejected was slowly being laid to rest.

"What does this have to do with Phebe's marrying? Does she have any feeling for Abram?"

"What I'm saying has a lot to do with it. She started to hate or fear Father, maybe both, although she's never told me as much. I'm afraid she feels that way toward all men. She actually comes close to being hysterical if you so much as mention having children. And now Aunt Susanne's arranging to have the marriage take place in three months. I'm worried. Whenever the subject turns to Abram and marrying, Phebe closes up. I can almost see the door slamming in my face .I can't reach her. It's frightening."

"You're working yourself up needlessly. Would you like me to speak with her? Would that do any good?"

"The only thing that will do any good is stopping the marriage, and I don't know how to arrange that," Sarah said quietly.

"Perhaps it's not for you to arrange. Phebe needs to make her own decisions. You can't keep protecting her, helping her."

Nina was surprised at Sarah's next comment. "You're right. I've always felt as though I *should* take care of Phebe. She's so helpless and I'm the strong one." Her voice trailed off.

Nina sat calculating Sarah's words, her thoughts no longer on Phebe but on this young woman who, in three short years, had become her daughter in everything but name.

When the Claxtons had answered Francis Comstock's advertisement, they had received so much more than help in the store and house. Sarah had filled an emptiness in their hearts, her problems and needs and joys drawing them out and enriching their lives.

"What about you, Sarah? What about marriage for you?" Nina asked, broaching the unspoken topic occupying her thoughts these past few months.

Sarah had her elbows propped on the table, her chin cupped in her palms. Her head came up with a start. "Sometimes our conversations remind me of our chess games. That was a clever move, Nina, and it caught me unaware."

"I know," Nina chuckled, delighted with Sarah's response. "Forgive me."

"You are. I only wish I knew how to answer you. All I can tell you is that I *don't* have Phebe's attitude toward marriage or children. There is much I can fault Father for, but Mother's death is not one of them. Mother was too independent a person to have allowed Father to have his way without her willing consent. Even at thirteen, I understood that much."

A sigh escaped her lips. "I'm *not* sure I want to be married but not out of fear or hatred of men. I wonder whether I'd ever be able to find a man as enlightened as Albert about women's minds and potential. Where would I find someone who'd understand the kind of freedom you allow one another?"

Nina kept her silence and watched a series of emotions flicker across Sarah's face before the younger woman began speaking again.

"Nina, when I came through this door three years ago, I thought I was to be a servant. Instead, you've treated me like a daughter. Not only that, you've fed my mind as well as my body and spirit. I knew so little of the world and the range of things to be found in it. With your help, I'm more aware although I still can't imagine there are more people like you around."

Nina laughed long and hard. "Sarah, you can be so dramatic at times. You know your poor father never imagined there were any people like us in this world or you would never have ended up here. Through his own prejudice, he thought we were nothing more than a traditional older couple. It's one of those strange hands that life deals from time to time."

Amusement faded from her face as she returned to the original topic. "Our home is yours, Sarah. You know that. Your work at the store is invaluable. We know you're not young any longer. You've mastered the intricacies of ordering, selling and bookkeeping necessary to run the store well. You know fabric, design, costs and expenditures. You can be an independent woman, yes. The question is do you want to be? And why?"

Nina shook her head quickly. "No, I don't expect an answer tonight. I know you're confused. I didn't have the problems of such choices when I was your age. When Albert and I stumbled into each other's arms and marriage, we developed our present way of living by trial and error. We didn't plan it out. Perhaps if we had children, I would now be a domesticated creature. It all evolved gradually and perhaps that's the best way."

"How did you know you wanted to marry Albert?" Sarah asked thoughtfully.

"I could say what my own mother told me: You just know," Nina replied. "It's not that you can't live *without* that person. You choose to live *with* him."

"Well, that makes it simple for me since I haven't met anyone with whom I'd care to spend more than ten minutes. After the first half hour of conversation, I'm ready to come back here to talk with you and Albert or curl up with a good book to spend the evening with—"

"Sarah," Nina interrupted with a laugh, "before you begin one of your tirades about the social graces of men, let's go and prepare dinner. We've been free from the store all afternoon. It's the least we can do for Albert."

Brahms, Sarah thought to herself. Pompous, deadly Brahms. She wondered how she ever allowed herself to say yes to Samuel Southworth's invitation. The fledgling Providence Philharmonic Society tried their best, but a whole evening's worth of stately Brahams was proving to be a bore. Sarah hid her frequent yawns behind her gloved hand. When intermission arrived, Sarah glanced at her escort and saw, to her horror, that he was thoroughly enjoying the evening's entertainment.

"Would you like to walk out to the hallway for fresh air?" he asked Sarah solicitiously, hoping she'd answer in the affirmative.

Before she had a chance to reply, Sarah heard her name being paged from the aisle behind them.

"Sarah Comstock. A Miss Sarah Comstock, please."

Samuel stumbled in his haste while Sarah remained far more composed and deftly reached the attendant's side through the crowd.

"I am Sarah Comstock. What is it?" she asked calmly.

"Sorry to disturb you, Miss. Would you please come to the manager's office?"

Samuel placed a protective hand on Sarah's arm, which she brushed off quickly. She knocked on the manager's door with a steadiness she didn't feel. As the door swung open, Sarah, to her relief, saw Albert Claxton standing inside.

"Good heavens, Albert. What is this all about?" she exclaimed and then suddenly thought of Nina. "Is Nina all right? Is anything wrong? What *is* the matter?"

"I don't know how to tell you, Sarah, except bluntly," Albert said in an unsteady voice. "It's your sister, Phebe. She's killed herself."

As the Kansas Pacific hurtled eastward toward Kansas City in April, 1872, one of Nathaniel P. Hill's young assistants stretched his legs out on the bench he occupied. Carlo Ghiberti had grown his first full beard, neatly trimmed and black with occasional prematurely gray streaks. Dark, curly hair covered his head, his hat having been laid to rest atop a stack of papers he had finished reading.

Deep-set, dark eyes looked through the grimy windows to the flat stretches of prairie on all sides. His enigmatic smile stood in sharp counterpoint to the intensity of his gaze.

Carlo Ghiberti had come to a crossroads in his life and was trying to reach a decision. He was arriving at a place beyond his imagination six years ago when he was a millhand in the thread company in Fairview Village.

At his job at Brown University Carlo learned the safest and quickest methods for disposing of dangerous chemicals and supplying gas for burners. The rest of his time was spent studying. He could little afford to be a student and his formal education had been scanty at best. He studied other students and paid attention to Professor Nathaniel P. Hill.

Carlo watched the way Hill talked and walked, dressed and carried himself in conversations. He imitated the professor's mannerisms in front of the mirror.

Looking back now, it had been those talks with Hill late at night in the lab that had changed his life. Hill told him stories about the West and gold mining, smelting and technology, opening for Carlo a new world that made the university and his job look pale in comparison. Hill began to leave books for Carlo, suggested lectures he should attend, and included him frequently in conversations dealing with Colorado.

Within two years, Carlo became one of Hill's assistants. He worked first with the Austrians and Italians, studying their approach to extracting gold from auriferous iron and copper pyrites. Hill recognized Carlo's growing adeptness in dealing with people and soon placed him in charge of hiring key men to work for the company in Gilpin County.

By this time, his sixth year away from Fairview Village, Carlo accomplished his job with ease, leaving Nathaniel Hill free to concentrate on the profitable expansion of the company.

Over the last six months, however, Carlo had felt a growing uneasiness with life. His brother Enrico had urged him to come home to attend his sister's wedding and Carlo surprised himself by saying yes. He hadn't taken a break from his work in almost three years. He had the luxury of traveling from country to country and state to state while working and felt that this was vacation enough. Unmarried, he was responsible to no one but Nathaniel P. Hill. He rarely questioned how long that would last, although the knot slowly tightening in his stomach told him that he and Mr. Hill could outgrow their usefulness to one another. Hill now had a fortune and politics while Carlo had substantial savings, youthful ambition and his old familiar nemesis: restlessness.

The day after his sister's wedding, Carlo agreed to meet his old friend, Donald Rumstick, for supper and in deference to Donald's Calvanist approach to entertainment, to attend the all-Brahms concert the local symphony had chosen as their program. After twenty minutes at the concert, Carlo could feel little but overwhelming boredom as he listened to the second somber selection.

Carlo tried to stretch his legs and realized that the seats were designed with style, not comfort, in mind. He found little solace in the fact that the more Donald suffered now, the more he'd enjoy his planned evening of pleasure with women and wine later. Carlo focused on the people sitting around him and noted the men's clothing, particularly the new, larger velvet collars on the long coats, and carefully appraised the women in the rows in front of him. He didn't care for bustles, standing or sitting, but found the stylish bodices made for interesting watching.

His eyes kept returning to one person in particular, a woman whose thick hair curled around the side of her face and then cascaded down her back unchecked by a hat, which any proper female would be wearing here this evening. He wondered whether she was a suffragist.

The lights brightened, signaling intermission and the end of Carlo's rambling thoughts. Suddenly an attendant's voice could be heard above the audience's murmurings.

"Miss Sarah Comstock. A Miss Sarah Comstock, please."

Carlo watched the woman without any headcovering arise and walk calmly up the aisle to the attendant, followed closely by a rather oafish-looking fellow.

"Well, I'll be damned," Carlo intoned softly. "The little Quakeress has left the fold."

"What, Carlo?" asked Donald.

"See that woman who was just paged? What do you think of her?"

"I really hadn't noticed. The First Symphony is one of my favorites, and they've done a superb job with it."

Carlo ignored his reply. "For heaven's sake, Donald. She was tall and slender, with dark hair and wearing no hat."

"You're really desperate, pal, if you're ogling every female that walks past. All I got was a glimpse of a thin, rather wild-looking thing. Must be your Latin temperament warming up—" Donald stopped his teasing when he saw the look on Carlo's face. "Hey, I was kidding. She's almost beautiful in a strange sort of way. I didn't realize you knew her."

"I haven't seen her for a very long time," Carlo answered slowly and then said no more.

He struggled to pay attention to the second half of the program but spent a great deal of time watching the aisle and the two empty seats in front of him.

When Sarah and her escort didn't return, Carlo became subdued and quietly left the auditorum at the conclusion of the concert. With little enthusiasm, he followed Donald to Katherine's Place where he acted very unexpectedly. He drank far too much rye, lost heavily at the blackjack table and in the end, collapsed in a stupor in a downstairs parlor.

Carlo walked with measured steps along the edge of Benefit Street, carefully keeping his freshly polished boots clean. Self-consciously he checked the buttons on his gray vest and flattened the wings of his white collar. Chagrined, he realized that this meeting with the society matron, Susanne Ferris, was giving him unhealthy, last-minute jitters.

One-eighty-eight. Assured this was the correct number, Carlo took a deep breath, climbed the stairs, and used just the right amount of pressure on the brass knocker below the elaborate numerals on the door. Carlo wondered briefly about the black mourning wreath tacked there before the door was slowly swung open by a colored servant. Carlo said an urgent prayer that his sister Beata hadn't led him astray and entered.

Carlo removed his bowler hat and handed the butler his card with the name Carl Gilbert engraved on the expensive white background. The butler nodded, took the visitor's hat and long coat, and excused himself.

Waiting for Susanne Ferris to make her appearance, Carlo tried to keep his mind from his reasons for being here. A case of mild curiosity had turned into a time-consuming search whose end now seemed to be in sight. He had tried to explain it to Donald one evening after a few glasses of wine and grew furious as his friend laughed long, loud and hard. Donald Rumstick found his behavior to be perfectly understandable: Cupid's arrow had finally struck.

After that utterly ridiculous remark, Carlo had curtly ended their conversation and avoided Donald for close to a week. Since then Donald had decided not to ask questions, which was more than Carlo could say for his sister. He had tried to wrangle information from Beata, but she had seen through his ploy almost immediately. As in the past, she preferred teasing to being helpful, but last week, when Carlo's other meager leads had vanished into nothingness, Beata's cryptic note had arrived at his boardinghouse:

Mr. Comstock tells people that his daughters no longer exist. Susanne Ferris in Providence had tried to help one of them. Do you need more details?

Adopting the name he and Hill had concocted for use where prejudices were apparent and detrimental, Carlo had written a brief, courteous note to Susanne Ferris of Benefit Street. She had written back saying she would receive him at 2:00 P.M. Thursday of the following week.

"Ah, so you are Mr. Gilbert. Pleased to meet you." Susanne Ferris's shrill voice preceded her mammoth body as she motioned him into the formal parlor to the right of the entrance hall. Carlo noted that she hadn't used the Quaker form of speech.

"You're most kind to permit me to speak with you so soon after receiving my letter," Carlo replied, bowing slightly before they seated themselves on richly brocaded chairs.

"I found your letter an interesting and welcome divertissement from the sorrows that have hung over my home and heart this past month." Susanne paused to sniff decorously. "Of course, I wouldn't think of turning away a Gilbert and a friend of my husband's family."

Carlo lowered his eyes, afraid that she'd see the amusement there. He knew instinctively that these next few minutes would be the most difficult.

"I'm sorry to hear that your life has been burdened lately. I noticed the wreath at the door when I arrived. If I had known of a recent death in your family, I would have waited before approaching you. As it is, I've only recently returned from the West," Carlo said smoothly, making certain that the correct amount of embarrassment was evident.

"No, don't apologize, young man. Very few people know of it. It hasn't been well publicized for obvious reasons. Such a pity—" Susanne's face crumpled. "Oh, dear. I thought I could speak of it but it is still a shock."

"Should I leave, Mrs. Ferris?" Carlo asked solicitiously, betting that this was the last thing Susanne Ferris desired.

"Please don't. I am such a foolish old lady. I do hope I haven't embarrassed you with my unseemly display."

Susanne had been examining Carlo's face closely and found him to be a handsome young man with impeccable manners. She wondered to which branch of the Gilberts Carl belonged and decided on the Kingston clan since she knew so few of them.

"I do hope the death wasn't among one of my acquaintances in the Comstock family," he was saying now.

"In fact, it was a Comstock," Susanne acknowledged, eyes shimmering with tears. "My dear niece, who had been in my charge for the past five years."

Carlo felt his heart stop beating for a fraction of a minute, then resume pounding again at double its normal rate. Her niece, he told himself, didn't necessarily mean Sarah Comstock.

"So young, only twenty-three, with her life before her. Phebe was a beautiful girl, gentle and meek."

Carlo realized that she must be referring to Francis Comstock's older daughter. Put off by her air of helplessness, Carlo had never found Phebe truly appealing.

"It must be difficult for her family," Carlo said cautiously steering the conversation toward Sarah.

"Most difficult for her poor father. That man has faced his share of tragedy in a short lifetime. But with each hardship, he moves even closer to the Lord."

"And his other daughter?" asked Carlo.

Susanne Ferris looked up sharply and gave Carlo a questioning glance. She moved closer to the edge of her chair and Carlo could feel that with his last question, he had placed himself on dangerous ground. He realized that staying near the truth was the only course left him.

"I see that I've disturbed you," he said softly.

Susanne relaxed slightly, easing her body back into her chair. "Yes, you have. We don't usually speak of her."

"My apologies. I have been away for a long time. I see that I've upset you by mentioning Sarah. That was her name, wasn't it?"

"You did catch me by surprise with your question but don't look so upset. The scandal happened long enough ago so that I can speak of Sarah quite calmly. She was a spiteful child and has grown into a willful young woman. Outspoken as a child and brazen as an adult, that's Sarah. Her dear father no longer could handle her after her disownment. You know that dreadful girl practically broke his heart."

Carlo nodded again. Susanne warmed to the sympathetic look on his handsome face but had no way of realizing that his sympathy was meant for Sarah, not her father.

"She couldn't reside with me, that was certain. So Francis placed her with an older couple here in the city, to work in their store and home. I'm sure they've had little success with her either."

"Any family of note?" Carlo asked casually.

"Oh, no. Just merchants, clothiers of some kind up on Angell Street." Susanne dismissed them with a flutter of her hand. "You know, that brazen thing tried to influence Phebe right up to the end."

Susanne watched Carlo shake his head gravely and thought him such a nice young man, so circumspect and proper.

After tea and butter cookies, Carlo graciously thanked Susanne Ferris for her hospitality. Only after he had left did Susanne Ferris notice that she had not learned one useful item about Carl Gilbert.

"Donald, old friend, I need your help in a rather delicate matter," Carlo said as soon as they had taken a booth in the lunchroom on Canal Street.

Donald looked at Carlo curiously. "Something serious, I assume, from the look on your face."

Carlo leaned back in the bench seat, not knowing how to begin. "This is difficult for me," he said finally.

"It's got to do with that girl you were looking for, right?"

"Her name is Sarah. Sarah Comstock," Carlo said testily.

During the trolley ride to Wayland Square, Carlo's uncertainty about his mission increased as each block went by. Donald, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying himself. In the first shop, he smoothly went through the motions of selecting and discarding shirts and ties while Carlo nervously paced the floor, hoping to spot Sarah.

"One down, three to go," Donald said cheerfully as they entered Claxton and Company on the next block. Their mouths fell open as they shut the door behind them. Sarah Comstock, in the full height of her fury, was throwing box upon box on the floor from her perch on a stepladder near the ceiling. Lounging comfortably in a chair well out of range, sat an older man wearing a puckish look, who was obviously enjoying the spectacle. He noticed the two young men and raised a finger to his lips, motioning them not to interrupt.

"I tell you, Albert Claxton. I won't ever. Do you hear me? Ever!" Sarah yelled, oblivious to all around her.

"I will not—"

Thud.

"—will never—"

Thud.

"Marry that toad—"

Thud.

"—nor will I do what Phebe did either!"

With that, the last of the boxes came off the top shelf in one final crash. Sarah pushed up her sleeves, dusted off her hands, and started to climb down the ladder.

The older man chuckled appreciatively. "That's the way, Sarah. Stick to it. I have no doubt that you will."

Suddenly he turned to his prospective customers and asked pleasantly, "May I help you?"

Donald and Carlo looked at one another dumbfounded. The man was acting as though nothing unusual had happened.

Donald was the first to recover. "I was looking for a dress shirt and possibly a tie?"

At this, Sarah whirled around, glanced briefly in their direction, and stalked off into the back room, a murderous look on her face.

"Men!" she muttered disgustedly as she exited.

Albert smiled sheepishly and shrugged. "I'm sorry you picked an unfortunate time to come in," he said. "She needed to get angry, good and angry. Hope her display didn't upset you fellows. Now, what color shirt were you looking for?"

"Well, I thought I'd stick with—"

"Excuse me," Carlo interrupted Donald's response. "I'd like to know if you're Albert Claxton."

"Why, yes," Albert answered amicably.

"And that was Sarah Comstock?"

"That, that most certainly was." Albert looked perplexed. "Are you here to make a purchase or take a roll call?"

"No, not at all," Carlo stammered, flushing for the first time in years.

Donald stepped smoothly into the embarrassing silence that followed.

"My name is Donald Rumstick, sir. This is my friend, Carlo Ghiberti. I'm afraid Miss Comstock's behavior gave him a shock. He wasn't quite expecting this." Donald chuckled.

"Then what were you expecting, Mr. Ghiberti?" Albert asked frowning.

"I knew Sarah, I mean Miss Comstock, back in Fairview Village years ago," Carlo began. Suddenly he laughed and said with a touch of awe, "You know, she hasn't changed a bit."

Now it was Albert's turn to laugh. "Oh, she's changed in some ways, but she's still full of spirit."

Donald nodded his head in vigorous agreement.

"Were you looking for a chance to speak with her?" Albert's curiosity was aroused, for Sarah had never mentioned anybody fitting this young man's description. "She didn't seem to recognize you."

"It's been a long time," Carlo replied. "I doubt that she would. Do you think she'll come back out here? She didn't seem too pleased with the prospect of customers."

At that moment Sarah pushed aside the curtain covering the doorway to the stockroom, carrying a pile of invoices. She held herself tall and walked in with an easy graceful stride to a desk in the corner. She carefully ignored all three men.

"Sarah," Albert called.

"Yes?"

"Would you mind waiting on these gentlemen for a moment?" He seemed almost apologetic. "I'll be right back." Carlo thought he saw Albert wink at him before turning to leave the room.

Sarah walked over and looked at the two men questioningly. Donald began the charade again, wondering how long before Carlo would introduce himself and end this nonsense. Still Carlo kept his silence. Donald, while examining the shirts in his size, noticed Sarah's eyes return to rest on Carlo time and again. Finally, she straightened up over the growing pile of shirts as though coming to a decision.

"I think I know you," she said at last, looking directly at Carlo.

Carlo dared to look at her closely for the first time since entering the store. That wild hair was as unkempt and lovely as before, but her face had changed markedly. Deep purple lines were etched under her eyes and a long furrow ran across her brow. Both the joy and innocence of childhood had vanished.

He noticed that she waited patiently for his reply; her intelligent dark eyes surveyed his face and struggled to remember him. And those eyes, full of life, deep and questioning, held him from speaking for a moment. He had never seen anything quite like them with their little splinters of gold and light.

"Yes, I know thee also," Carlo said in heavily accented English, smiling a very boyish grin, not knowing or caring what possessed him to act as young and silly as the day he first met her.

"You're one of those *Eye-talians*," Sarah responded, her face set in mock seriousness. "The only problem is that you all look the same to me."

Carlo laughed delightedly.

"Carlo Ghiberti," Sarah said softly, her features taking on a bittersweet quality. She wondered why she hadn't recognized him immediately, for he still looked like the Lucifer pictured in Heather's church book—perhaps more so with that full beard.

"You've changed but you haven't changed, if you know what I mean," Sarah said, suddenly at a loss for words. She felt awkward standing across the counter from him. He looked so self-assured with that same cool, amused manner that had flustered her six years earlier.

"I think I do know. It's the same for me. You're not what I remember but in some ways . . ." Carlo's voice trailed off. He had almost embarrassed himself by saying that in some ways she was far more intriguing than he had ever remembered or imagined.

"If you two will excuse me, I'd like to introduce myself," Donald said. "I'm Donald Rumstick, a friend of this now tongue-tied young man, but I understand his behavior. It's not every day I have the pleasure of meeting someone like you, Miss Comstock."

Sarah turned her attention to Donald. Tall and thin, with fashionably cut blond hair and glasses, he appeared as slight and fair as Carlo was dark and muscular. His clothes and manner were impeccably correct, his smile quite charming. Sarah found herself graciously accepting his compliment while Carlo scowled at this interruption. Sarah was becoming as amused and cool-headed as Carlo had been earlier.

"Miss Comstock," Donald was saying. "You were magnificent with those boxes earlier. No, maybe terrifying would be the more appropriate word. Although I hold the same view as you toward marriage, I've never displayed my opinion in quite the same manner."

Sarah threw her head back and laughed. Instead of looking unladylike, Donald found her casual naturalness a pleasure to watch. She was most unusual, and he could now understand why Carlo had thought about her for years after their meeting.

"I was terrifyingly angry," Sarah said by way of explanation. "When I'm mad, I tend to become physical. You know, throwing things can be very satisfying."

"Then the man who made the proposal was fortunate not being here. Those boxes could hurt."

"Oh, I don't want to hurt him. I just want him to go away."

"Can I help?"

Sarah gave Donald a searching look. "I have always fought my own battles most adequately." Her face softened when she added, "But thank you anyway."

Carlo was annoyed at being ignored for Donald who had come along to support him, not to monopolize the conversation. He was relieved to see Albert return, although he had the sneaking suspicion that the older man hadn't been far away, probably directly behind the curtained doorway listening.

"You seem to be getting reacquainted after all. Good, good," Albert bubbled, *rubbing his hands together. "You don't* think I could have the same privilege? I mean getting to know you two. What about an invitation to dinner? Yes, that's a perfect idea. You see, our home is Sarah's. She is our daughter, so to speak. Tomorrow evening at our house, that is if it's agreeable to you three?"

Sarah fixed Albert with a deadly stare, but Carlo and Donald both chose to ignore her and quickly accepted his invitation. Albert gave them directions and set the time while Sarah continued to fume silently.

"Albert," Sarah said menacingly when Carlo and Donald left the store a few minutes later. "If I didn't know you better, I'd call you a scheming conniver. Since when have you begun to invite strangers to dinner?"

Albert just smiled innocently, and only when Sarah had moved well out of earshot did he gleefully answer, "Ever since I set my eyes on the first man worthy of you. I do think you've finally met your match, Sarah, love."

Carlo paced the length of his small rented room, stopping every second or third trip by the mirror to adjust his necktie or smooth his unruly hair. A knock on the door interrupted him.

"Donald, it better be you," Carlo yelled. "We're late enough as it is."

"I see that Carlo is a wee bit edgy tonight," Donald said.

"And Donald is more than a wee bit tight. Come on."

They made the trolley connection to Wayland Square and walked the few blocks to the Claxton house with Carlo leading a rather boisterous Donald. At any other time Carlo would have found Donald's antics amusing, but tonight he was having trouble being lighthearted.

If only he hadn't received that cable today saying that Pearce would be in Boston on May 27th, three short days away. And then, as if that hadn't been enough, Hill's letter arrived from Colorado putting pressure on him from another angle.

A man couldn't live his life his own way, Carlo thought. Run here. Run there. Do this. Do that. By the time he reached Angell Street, Carlo was ready to pound his frustration on the Claxtons' door.

Within a minute Sarah swung the door open, a scowl to equal Carlo's on her face.

"Hello. Please come in." Sarah spoke the words politely, but her tone was far from welcoming. Despite his black mood, Carlo noted that Sarah's green silk dress fit snugly on top and fell in *loose, soft folds to the floor, rather than* being gathered into the more fashionable bustle.

"Yes, do," Albert echoed, popping up behind Sarah. He smiled warmly. "Welcome to our home. Please come into the library and meet my wife, Nina."

He led the way through the most unusual house Carlo had ever seen. There were plants everywhere, hanging from the ceilings and in front of every window. Orange, yellow, and brown hooked rugs littered floors and walls. Unbelievable stacks of books were piled high on end table, chair, and floor as well as on the library shelves in each room. Carlo, who read both well and fast, estimated it would take a lifetime to read them all.

As they entered the library, a short woman with graying hair arose from a writing table. She walked forward, extending her hand in greeting. To Carlo's surprise, he saw that she wore a loose-fitting gown obviously free of the proper stays and corsets.

"Thank you for accepting Albert's invitation," Nina said. "It's good to be having guests once again, although I'm certain some people will be scandalized by our short period of proper mourning."

Carlo wasn't sure if he should mention Phebe's death and was thankful when Sarah rescued him.

"My sister died unexpectedly last month," she explained matter-of-factly. "It's been difficult for all of us, but I think it's about time for life to go on as usual, no matter what's in our hearts."

Carlo was relieved to see Sarah speaking calmly, for he could tolerate hysterics in women little more than he could simpering. He wondered if those dark circles under Sarah's eyes were due to Phebe's death. They had puzzled him since they spoke eloquently of sleepless nights and a restless spirit, things he knew well.

"A glass of sherry?" Nina offered, after introductions had been completed. "You'll have to excuse Albert. He's busy in the kitchen giving last-minute touches to the dinner."

"My father would be aghast, never having lifted a finger to help in the kitchen," Carlo said with a small smile. "Yet so many of his former countrymen are outstanding cooks. I discovered that on my last trip abroad."

"Then the culinary arts interest you, Mr. Ghiberti?" Nina asked.

"Please call me Carlo. No, not really. I travel much and have no permanent home. Restaurants are my usual fare, one reason why I appreciate your invi*tation tonight.*"

Sarah stood abruptly, turned and began fingering books on the wall. Carlo could feel his face growing warm. He saw Sarah's move as a personal rebuff and worried whether he had sounded more pompous than worldly.

"Prices have been ridiculously high since the war," Sarah was saying. "Unfortunately, the only way they'll return to normal levels is through hardship—unemployment, bank failures, wage cutting."

"I agree," Donald said. "And we've got to cut down on immigration. Look what the flood of immigrants is doing to our economy."

"I know what they've been doing for the mining industry," Carlo interjected, unable to keep silent any longer. "Without the knowledge and skill of the Cornish, Germans, Austrians, and Italians, we wouldn't be producing anywhere near the rate we are now."

Donald smiled. "Carlo is all for expansion, opening our shores to one and all. He has great visions based on the unlimited potential of the West."

"Donald, you'd stop arguing if you ever went West just once. That country is incredible. It has a beauty surpassing anything in Europe. It's rugged, wild, and the riches—why we have no idea of what's hidden in those magnificent mountains."

"You really love the wilderness and life in the mountains?" Sarah asked, finding it difficult to picture this urbane figure in miner's canvas or denim, grubbing in gravel pits and mining shafts.

"Yes," Carlo declared without hesitation. "At first I was overwhelmed. I had never seen snow-capped peaks, Indians, raging blizzards, dust storms. Real cities exist out there, too—Denver, for instance—but I spend most of my time in the small towns around the mills and mines and smelters. They're a far cry from the New England village. They're dirty, smelly, stripped of trees, filled with slag heaps. They might not be beautiful to look at but what excitement! That country is so alive."

"Good heavens," Albert interrupted, returning to announce dinner. "What are you talking about? Your wife, family, or love interest of some kind? Such warmth in your voice! Such love in your eyes!"

"I guess I get like that when I talk about my favorite place on this earth," Carlo explained. "And no, to your oblique questioning. I'm not married nor do I have any commitment to a young lady." He wanted Albert to know that he had seen through his ploy.

"*Touché*," Albert laughed, unabashed, as he ushered them into the dining room.

Sarah, I've said much about myself. What has happened to you these past few years? And what about your future?" Carlo was standing next to her, coffee in hand, his dark eyes looking directly into hers.

"Before I answer, I have a question of my own. Your coming to the shop yesterday couldn't have been accidental. How? Or better yet, why?" Now it was Sarah's turn to fix him with a steady stare.

Carlo chuckled softly. "It wasn't easy." He glanced over at the Claxtons and Donald engrossed in their own conversation. "You no longer lived in Fairview. I happened to run into your Aunt Susanne and behold, I found you on Angell Street."

"That doesn't sound simple, for Aunt Susanne wouldn't talk about me if her life depended on it."

"Oh, yes, 'you spoiled child and brazen adult,'" Carlo said in perfect imitation of Aunt Susanne. "'Dreadful, truly dreadful, soooo willful!'"

"She is a bit of a monster, isn't she?" Sarah said laughingly. She noticed he had neatly avoided answering why he had taken the trouble to find her again. She sat on the sofa and motioned to Carlo to join her.

"I don't know what I want for my future, but I know more about what I don't want."

Her eyes darkened and Carlo saw the golden lights in them fade. "As you and Donald saw, I don't want marriage or at least a traditional one where wife means servant and slave combined. I don't want to be confined to the home, to bed in continual childbirth, to living my life through my husband." She shook her head as though coming back from far away.

"That's quite a list of don't's." Carlo had never heard a woman speak so frankly about her life.

"I can see that I've shocked you," Sarah said without apology.

"No," Carlo said, not quite truthfully. "It's a relief not to have to wade through the elaborate etiquette required when speaking to women."

"No fear of that around me, I'm afraid," Sarah replied ruefully.

"Have the past few years been difficult, Sarah?"

Slowly she nodded her head. Carlo was totally unlike the men she had been seeing recently. Her feelings and thoughts seemed to matter to him.

"If you spoke with Aunt Susanne, then you must know that I was shunned by Friends for not acting in the maner they approved. My father and I haven't communicated in three years. I probably will not go back to Fairview again. And last month my only sister killed herself." All of this was said straightforwardly without a hint of self-pity.

"I admire your strength," Carlo said after a moment's silence. "I've never lost anyone close to me through death or my own convictions. I can only guess what the cost has been to you."

He looked away almost immediately, embarrassed by the warmth in his voice. Sarah continued to sit there quietly, his unexpected words touching her deeply.

"Carlo," Donald called. "Nina and Albert have suggested our joining them this Saturday for an evening at the theater. They could be our guests for dinner. A good idea, isn't it?"

"Yes, a great idea," Carlo said, shaking his head reluctantly. "But I won't be able to make it. I've been called out of town and I'm not sure for how long. I must leave early tomorrow."

Sarah heard his response with mixed feelings. She thought she had detected a note of relief in Carlo's voice—almost as if he were glad to have an excuse not to join them. This angered her as much as her own unexpected disappointment on hearing he would be leaving Providence so soon.

Whatever intimacy had arisen between them vanished. Sarah stood and crossed the room, smiling sweetly at Donald who professed his delight in accompanying her to the theater without the aid of his friend. They made the necessary plans and soon the time had come for bidding one another goodnight. As Carlo walked to the door, he caught an unfathomable look on Sarah's face.

"Have a pleasant trip," she told him coolly, and quietly closed the door on their retreating backs.

"Why not look me up in another six years?" she added angrily under her breath before stomping upstairs to her bedroom.

"What did I tell you?" Albert asked Nina. He gave her a knowing smile.

"Men!" his wife exclaimed in imitation of Sarah's oft-repeated refrain. She leaned over and kissed him affectionately. "Who knows? You might even be right."

Over the bottle of rye in Carlo's room later that same night, Donald was again singing Sarah's praises, much to Carlo's chagrin.

"Old boy," his now drunken friend was saying, glasses crooked and sitting low on his nose, "I've found myself a girl at last. She didn't buy your story about leaving town either but I appreciate it. You're a real friend, leaving the field open to me. A real, true friend."

Before Donald finally slumped forward on the table, head in arms, snoring loudly, Carlo had sarcastically given him his blessings. Heaven knows, he told himself disgustedly. Donald would need every bit of help he could get trying to tame that female.

Carlo made his way to the bed and leaned back on his pillow. But when he shut his eyes, all he saw was wildly curling hair and gold-flecked, deep brown eyes.

"Damn. I'm a lot drunker than I thought," he muttered. "But when I'm sober, Sarah Comstock, you'll be forgotten."

Carlo remained true to his word. Over the next three weeks, Sarah Comstock was the last person in his thoughts as he worked ten- and twelve-hour days. Only one name held any meaning for him: Richard J. Pearce, the son of a superintendent in the ancient tin mines of Cornwall, England.

Nathaniel Hill was convinced that his company—the Boston & Colorado—needed Pearce's talents badly, but Pearce had no strong inclination to emigrate. It was Carlo's job to steer Pearce through the managerial meetings with the Board and backers of the fledgling company and at the same time to persuade both Pearce and the Board that their best future lay in working together.

After one week in Boston with Pearce, Carlo was convinced that Hill was right —the company's healthy future rested in this one astute Cornishman. And now, two weeks later, the Board of the Boston & Colorado finally agreed with Carlo, despite the shaky financial outlook and risks. Pearce, with his working crew, was to arrive in America at the start of the new year.

Carlo was finishing a long letter to Hill outlining the agreement when he heard knocking on his hotel room door.

"Who is it?" Carlo yelled over his shoulder as he signed his name with a self-satisfied flourish.

"The voice of your decadent past," a well-disguised tenor replied.

Carlo got up from the writing table and opened the door. "For heaven's sake. Donald! What are you doing here in Boston?"

"Visiting you, of course," Donald answered, putting his arms around his friend's shoulders. "It's good to see you again."

"You, too." Carlo felt thrown off his guard since Donald rarely wandered far from his base in Providence. "If you had arrived twenty-four hours later, you'd have missed me. I'm heading for New York in the morning."

"Seems to be the story of our friendship," Donald said sadly. "What for this time?"

"To make a connection to St. Louis."

"I know. And from there, it's Kansas City and then onward to God's Country," Donald interjected, grinning widely. "Well, I'm glad we weren't too late."

"We?"

"Me, of course, and the Claxtons and Sarah Comstock. Imagine, Sarah's taking over the buying for the fall line and she's doing a terrific job of it, too. She needed to come to Boston for a couple of days. I wanted everything to be proper, so the Claxtons agreed to tag along as chaperones. Albert suggested we look you up for dinner tonight. And, lo and behold, here I am. You're such a creature of habit that I had no trouble finding you. Same old hotel you stayed in four years ago."

Carlo looked at Donald and quickly sized up the situation. It hadn't been just liquor talking that night. Donald was serious about Sarah, although she wasn't his type. He wondered whether Donald realized how obviously misdirected his attentions were.

"I seem to be more of a creature of habit than you these days," Carlo remarked dryly.

"And I can see you've been overworking again. You're as grouchy as a bear," Donald said, undisturbed by Carlo's bad temper. "I hope Hill is paying you well for your services."

"He is and I'm not grouchy. In fact, I was just finishing a letter telling Nathaniel P. of a very successful solution to a tricky problem."

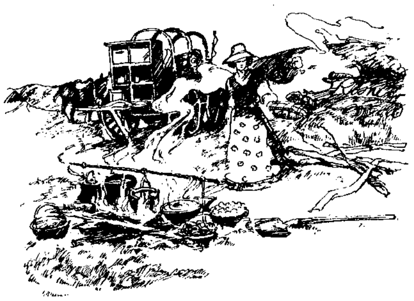
"Then you're free to join us?"

"If I can bring a friend along."

Donald's eyes twinkled behind his glasses. "So that's why Boston is so attractive to you. Who is she?"

"He," Carlo corrected swiftly. "Richard Pearce, an Englishman who's going to work for Hill in Colorado after the first of the year. Fascinating man, really. You'll like him."

"I find you impossible," Donald exclaimed. "You're not happy unless you're working. And you'd take the company of a miner over a girl any day."



"What's wrong with that?" asked Carlo. He swung around to face Donald directly. "At least I don't make a fool of myself chasing after an oversized, fire-eating wild woman!"

Donald stood very still and after a long minute spoke quietly. "I'm going to make believe I didn't hear you say that. Sarah's every inch a lady. If you can't take her spirit and intelligence, that's your problem. And I would appreciate it if you kept any derogatory thoughts about Sarah to yourself in the future. Do you understand?"

"And who are you to tell me how I should act?"

"I'm not telling you how to behave, only that you'd better keep your opinions to yourself when they concern someone who already means much to me."

"Look," Carlo said carefully. "We've been good friends too long to fight like this. I'll admit I was out of line. If the invitation is still open, I'll take you up on it. And I promise I'll be on my very best behavior."

Donald's expression lost some of its anger. "All right. Apology accepted. We'll meet you in the lobby of the Belmont at seven. Pearce is welcome. I'll make reservations for six. Be seeing you."

When Donald closed the door behind him, Carlo went back to the table, a frown creasing his forehead. Suddenly he slammed his fist against the wood but, for the life of him, couldn't say why he was so angry.

A few hours later, waiting in the lobby with Pearce, Carlo found his temper hadn't improved.

"Good evening, Mr. Ghiberti," someone behind him said, causing him to jump. Carlo recognized the rather deep, melodious voice immediately.

"Good evening, Miss Comstock," he answered with equal formality as he turned to face her. "You startled me."

"I meant to," she said with a sudden laugh. "You always look so in command of every situation that I'm constantly tempted to throw you off-balance."

"You dislike me that much?" Carlo asked, his head cocked to one side in mock consternation.

"Oh, no," Sarah replied, eyes wide with innocence. "Fiery, oversized wild women can't afford to make too many enemies, can they?"

With that, she smiled sweetly at Carlo's flushed face and introduced herself with perfect composure to Richard Pearce. Donald and the Claxtons approached and, after further greetings, went to the dining room of the hotel.

Once he was over his initial embarrassment, Carlo found himself smiling. With grudging admiration, he admitted that Sarah Comstock had neatly put him in his place. He watched her furtively throughout dinner while keeping up a running conversation with Nina about the events of the past three weeks.

Sarah appeared to dazzle Pearce and Donald. These two spent most of the meal trying to outdo one another with witticisms and regaling Sarah with their hilarious tales. Occasionally Carlo would catch Albert looking at him speculatively.

At Albert's suggestion, they decided to retire to the sitting room in the Claxton suite for a second cup of coffee. And as they took the elevator to the third floor, Carlo positioned himself next to Sarah for the first time since their encounter before dinner.

"My compliments. I deserved that,"

Carlo said softly, hoping no one else could hear him. "I'd like to retract those words now, if possible. They were unkind and untruthful."

Sarah looked at him as though she doubted his sincerity.

Seeing her response, Carlo leaned over and whispered, "I'm surprised that Donald would hurt your precious feelings by telling you what I had said."

Sarah left the elevator when it stopped and began walking down the corridor to the room before she turned to face Carlo.

"You're wrong," she corrected him. "Donald didn't tell me. I overheard him when he was talking with Nina about your run-in this afternoon." She smiled ruefully. "That old saying about eavesdroppers is evidently true."

She stopped again and watched his expression closely as she asked, "What made you feel so strongly? I've never given you cause to dislike me that intensely."

"I'm not sure, Sarah," Carlo answered truthfully. "I could be chivalrous and say that I'm jealous that my best friend has found himself a beautiful girl. I could say that I don't want to lose my friend to marriage, that I have designs on you myself. But none of those answers would be true. It's simply that you two don't belong together. You're beautiful but you're still a girl. And when you do grow up and become a woman, you and Donald will be the mismatch of the century."

"Thank you for the lecture on maturation," Sarah said sarcastically. "How did I ever get by these twenty-one years without your vast experience to guide me?" She hurried to reach the others before they entered the room.

"Sarah, wait." Carlo caught up with her and grabbed her arm. "I didn't mean to sound that way. I was only trying to answer you honestly. Why is it that I find myself apologizing to you every time we meet?"

"Perhaps because you're always sticking your foot into your oversized mouth," Sarah said quietly and shook her arm loose from his hold.

"That was bitchy!" Carlo glared at her indignantly.

"You really shouldn't use such language around *girls*."

"Women." Disgust and exasperation flitted across Carlo's face.

"Why, thank you, Carlo. Now that you've recognized me as one, shall we join the others?"

Carlo heard a note of triumph in her voice that infuriated him more than anything said so far. Almost before he realized what he was doing, he moved closer to Sarah until she was pressed with her back to the wall. He wasn't aware that the others had entered the Claxton suite, for all he could see was Sarah's eyes flaring back in anger at him.

"I recognize you as a woman in other ways, too," he said huskily. He put his hands around her waist and kissed her with unexpected force. He could feel her anger and it made him want to subdue her. She surprised him when she refused to fight back or resist. She stood motionless, neither acknowledging or denying his body or his kiss. He pulled himself away from her, his own anger quickly spent.

"Are you finished?" she asked coolly.

Carlo was shaken. He had never forced himself on a woman nor had he ever known this strange desire pulsing through him. He felt ashamed, confused—and yet exhilarated.

"When I go to bed with a man," Sarah said, breaking the growing silence between them, "it will be by choice, not by force. Don't forget that, Carlo Ghiberti." Her words were steady and measured. "Any man may have his way by force. It takes a special kind of person to be worthy of giving and receiving gently by free will. I doubt that you're that kind of person."

"Sarah, you confuse me," Carlo said, struggling with feelings new to him. "I don't know how to act with you."

"It's mutual, Carlo. I see you as everything I try to avoid. For you there are only two types of women and since I have no plans to sell my body or be placed on a pedestal, there's no room for us to communicate or act. And stop gaping at me," she added with a hint of a smile. "I know a lady shouldn't talk like this. But I don't pretend to be one."

"Then I don't know who or what you are," Carlo said.

"Well, you can ponder that to your heart's content on your journey westward."

"I think I'll leave it to Donald Rumstick to ponder your mysteries, and if you'll make my excuses to the rest of the company, I'll say farewell here and now. I think Pearce can find his way back to the hotel without any problem."

Carlo gave a small bow, glad to have the situation under control once again. But when he straightened and looked into Sarah's eyes, he knew that she had won this round.

Sarah sighed, leaned back in the chair and stretched her legs out under the desk in the corner of the store. It was time for the Claxtons to sell the store. It had been a bad year and profits were down, but they had steadfastly refused, feeling, as Albert had put it, that "Sarah needed a base." But Sarah knew that as long as the Claxtons continued to support her, her independence was a mockery.

On top of that Sarah wasn't sure how much longer she could continue to put off Donald Rumstick. He would be an ideal husband, Sarah knew, but every time she thought of that she mentally said, "for somebody else." She had told Albert that, and he had only told her tenderly to remain honest with herself.

"There are times when I'm not sure who I am," Sarah admitted aloud to herself in the gathering darkness. "I used to feel so sure of myself and I've lived through Mother's and Phebe's deaths and Father's hatred of me. I've always felt strong but now I don't. I don't now where I'm going or why."

Tears, held in check for too long, spilled down Sarah's face until she felt she could cry no more. Drained, she put her head on the desk.

Long moments later, Sarah heard a key turn in the lock and saw the door open. A tall figure was silhouetted by the illuminating lights on the street. Sarah held her breath until Donald Rumstick, satisfied that no one was in the darkness of the store, closed and locked the door as he left.

Sarah felt silly now for avoiding Donald but she hadn't wanted him to see her depressed and in need of comfort. She grabbed her cape and ran out the back way, hoping to beat Donald home by the alley. Breathing heavily in the cold air, she raced the three blocks to the house and up the back steps, knocking over one of the garbage bins in her haste. She spied the print of a strange newspaper and stopped.

Rocky Mountain News, November 30, 1872. Puzzled, Sarah shook off old tea leaves stuck to one side of the paper and hastily shoved it in her muff before running indoors.

"Don't let Donald know I've just arrived," she whispered to Albert in the kitchen as she started to tiptoe up the back stairs. She had almost made it to the top when Donald's booming voice stopped her.

"If you want to avoid me, Sarah Comstock, you don't have to skulk through alleys, knocking over trash."

Sarah had never heard Donald raise his voice before. She stared down at him as he stood at the bottom of the stairs, his legs apart and arms folded across his chest. He had an angry scowl on his face.

"Sorry, Donald," Sarah said meekly, feeling more foolish by the moment. "I don't know what got into me. I was sitting in the store thinking and then it got dark and when you came in, I felt silly sitting there so I didn't say anything."

There was a hint of a smile now around his mouth. Sarah began to breathe a little easier, for his usual good humor was returning. "Sarah, you're impossible."

"Not impossible," she corrected Donald with a little laugh. "Just different."

"Different enough to marry me?" Donald asked in a casual tone. "You know I can't spend the rest of my life chasing after you like this."

For one of the few times in her life, Sarah was speechless.

"I can think of more romantic ways to propose, but you avoid them so deftly that I'm left with this." Donald gestured to the kitchen and stairs. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Will you marry me? I might as well tell you now, I won't accept no."

"Donald, this is insane."

"So is trying to court you, Sarah."

"I can't marry you."

"Give me one good reason."

"I'm not the marrying kind. You know that."

"No, I don't," he countered calmly.

"Donald. I could give you all kinds of intellectual reasons but . . . I keep running away inside whenever any man gets close. It doesn't make any sense."

Donald climbed the stairs and sat next to her. He placed his arm around her. "Don't rush it, Sarah. I love you and I'll wait."

He pushed her hair back off the side of her face and brushed her cheek with a soft kiss that was brotherly and caring She leaned her head on his shoulder.

Donald raised his hand and stroked her hair gently. He knew he couldn't push someone like Sarah. He'd be here when she was ready, no matter how long it took.

Nina, Albert and Sarah were comfortably settled around the kitchen table for their Sunday ritual of afternoon tea.

"Albert," Sarah said, placing her cup on the saucer firmly, "you've been communicating with Carlo Ghiberti, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"I thought this was a household without secrets."

"As far as I know, it is."

"Then how is it I didn't know about this until I knocked over the garbage bin last week?"

Albert looked confused and glanced at Nina for help. Nina shrugged her shoulders and sipped tea.

"I found an old copy of the *Rocky Mountain News* in the garbage and saw a note from Carlo on your desk yesterday and I put one and one together."

"I didn't think you'd be interested," Albert answered nonchalantly. "You obviously dislike him and make no attempt to hide your feelings, so I didn't bother mentioning it. He really has very little to say of interest to you anyway. All he talks about can be summed up in two words—mountains and opportunities. The newspaper, on the other hand, is rather fascinating, nothing like our Eastern papers."

"Albert, you know darn well that I'm curious as you about the West. Why else would I be reading all those library books on mining and geography? In fact, I have half a mind to travel out there one of these days."

On hearing that last piece of information, Albert looked genuinely startled. He let out a low whistle. "Really?"

"Yes," Sarah said with more determination than she felt. "I would give me time to think about Donald's proposal without his constantly pushing me." She tried to find the courage to look into their faces, imagining their anger and dismay when she next spoke. Instead, two pair of warm sympathetic eyes rested on her, urging her to continue.

"I've been so very happy with both of you and without all you've given me—well I'm not sure I would have survived. But right now my life is missing something. And I have a hunch that being married to Donald wouldn't help."

"You have an idea or plan then to change this?" Nina asked quietly.

"I'm not sure. I saw an advertisement in the *News* that I can't help stop thinking about. I might as well warn you—it's rather unorthodox."

"It must be, if *you're* calling it that," Albert said.

"The newspaper needs a society reporter who can give reviews of books, plays, social events, that kind of thing. It's something I can do and it interests me more than schoolteaching or working in a store, other than your own."

Her embarrassment was evident when she looked directly into Nina's eyes. "I did more than think about it," Sarah confessed. "I mailed a letter yesterday seeking the position. I signed it S. Comstock and didn't tell them my sex. I was upset with myself this morning for not having the courage to talk with you before I acted."

"Sarah," Nina asked in a practical tone, "even if the position is still open after all these months and they hire you long-distance, without references or knowing your experience, what will they do when they see you upon your arrival in Denver? What then?"

"I'll have to handle that matter then and there. I'm quite sure I could talk them into it. From what I've read, the West is different and maybe the attitude toward working women is, too."

Albert threw his hands in the air. "Ah, the impetuous nature of youth!"

"If I keep on relying on your generosity, I'll soon be way past a youthful age," Sarah retorted. "I need to do something and this prospect intrigues me."

"Intrigues you or gives you an excuse to run away from Donald and marriage?" Nina's voice was gentle.

"Both, if I'm truthful, although the thought of traveling halfway across the country alone scares me half to death."

"Traveling is a problem," Nina agreed. "But we'll worry about it when you hear a reply from the *News*."

"I have your blessings on this?"

"No," Albert said resolutely. "Only because you've stolen my thunder on the subject. I've been thinking of traveling out there to take a good look around. From Carlo's glowing reports, it sounds like a change in scenery is something Nina and I might need in our old age. We haven't had time to consider it fully."

Albert stopped talking and looked at Sarah sharply. "Speaking of Carlo, he doesn't have anything to do with the direction of your ideas, does he?"

"Albert, you know better than to ask that," Sarah replied brusquely. "I have no plans of seeing him here or in the Colorado Territory either. And since you seem to be on such friendly terms with him, I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell him anything about me or my plans when you write."

"Never fear," Albert chuckled. "Does that same injunction go for Donald?"

"I'll tell him about it when the job comes through," she replied, her optimism more firmly in wish than reality.

As soon as she walked into the house, Sarah knew that a reply to her application had arrived in the afternoon mail. Albert and Nina were sitting at the dining room table with a long white envelope lying midway between them.

Sarah dashed to the table and began

tearing at the side of the envelope. Her eyes scanned the contents once quickly and then more slowly. Finally, Albert could wait no longer.

"Blast it, what does he say?"

"I think 'yes,'" Sarah said uncertainly. "It's a strange answer. See for yourself." She handed the letter to Albert who began reading it aloud.

> *Dear S. Comstock:*
>
> *Thank you for your recent letter regarding the position of reporter. I'm sorry to say that I had already found a suitable person for this job by the time your letter arrived.*
>
> *I was much taken with your detailed letter and proficiency with the written word. I took the liberty of sharing it with the editor of the Central City* Clarion, *presently in need of qualified reporters. Mr. Jack Langhorne, the editor, was equally impressed with your letter and I'm pleased to say, willing to hire you for his newspaper. He, of course, will be writing you shortly regarding salary, travel details, and other matters.*
>
> *In the meantime, I'm delighted to be the first to welcome you to your new job in the Colorado Territory.*
>
> *Very sincerely yours,*
> *William Byers, Editor*
> Rocky Mountain News

Albert turned the letter over and read the postscript scrawled on the back.

> *I envy my colleague in Central City for having the distinction of hiring one of the first female reporters in the Territory. My congratulations.*
>
> *WB*

Albert suppressed a laugh after taking a look at Sarah's reddening face.

"I hadn't seen that," she said with a grimace. "Well, so much for my cleverness."

"Byers is a well-respected man," Albert said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, "but I can make inquiries about the *Clarion* and its editor. I bet these two men have plenty of questions about our dear Sarah in return. Now what kind of self-respecting female would apply for a man's job and travel two thousand miles for it? The doubts here go both ways."

"I guess so," Nina said dubiously. "Sarah?"

"Even without Albert's investigation, I'm ready to take my chances and go."

"If you go, you'll be on your own at first," Albert warned. "We don't know how long it will take to sell the store or whether we should sell or rent the house. There are a thousand details to consider. We're older people and can't be uprooted that quickly."

"Just knowing that you'll be out there with me within a year is enough for me for now." Sarah hugged Albert as Donald entered the room.

"I knocked a few times but no one answered. I saw you in here through the window. I hope you don't mind," he said with an apologetic smile.

"No, not at all, Donald," Nina answered graciously. "Albert, I need your help in the library with some books. Please excuse us." She dragged a reluctant Albert behind her.

"What's wrong with them tonight?" Donald asked. "Things around here never are normal."

"I know," Sarah laughed. "And they're going to get stranger and stranger."

"How that?"

"The details aren't worked out completely, but I'm leaving and going out West." Sarah blurted.

Donald stood motionless, not certain he had heard correctly. Fleetingly, he thought of Carlo Ghiberti and wondered whether there was a connection and then swiftly rejected the idea.

"Why?"

"I'm not sure. To find something to live for. To decide about my future. To decide about us."

"You have to go clear across the continent to be able to think?"

"I've found a job out there," she answered, avoiding his question.

Donald sank down into one of the dining room chairs. "I'm almost afraid to ask. Doing what?"

"A newspaper reporter."

Donald put his head in his hands and gave a little shudder. "You never cease to surprise me, Sarah. Never."

Sarah took his hands away from his face and held them tightly. "Donald, I don't want to hurt you. I need time to start living my own life, my own way, for myself. I'm selfish. You deserve someone who would give you more happiness than I can."

"I think I may be a better judge of my own happiness," Donald replied caustically. "Do you care to share more of your plans with me, beginning with where in the West?"

"It looks like I'll be in Central City in the Colorado Territory."

"Great, you not only run away from me but right into the arms of my best friend."

"Donald, if you don't know my opinion of your best friend by now, I'll tell you straight—"

"Save your breath. It was a poor joke. I know that you're immune to Carlo's charms, thank goodness."

"And I'll stay that way, too," Sarah interjected. "I've asked Albert not to write to Carlo about my traveling there. I'm asking you to do the same. I'd feel better not being in contact with him if I can help it."

"You mean that Albert and Nina aren't going with you? That's ridiculous. You can't travel alone."

"I'm traveling alone and will have no problems with it, either."

"That settles it. I'm going with you."

"And compromise my reputation," Sarah said in what Donald took to be real consternation.

"I don't mean as a mate, or, uh, as a—"

"Are you trying to say 'lover'?" Sarah asked helpfully.

Donald flushed angrily. "Stop teasing, Sarah. You won't marry me. You'll travel halfway across this blasted country and you have the nerve to say if I escort you, I'll compromise your reputation. Well, someone has to look after your reputation. You sure as hell aren't."

"I know it isn't a joking matter. I've a strange sense of humor, part of my Quaker upbringing," Sarah said in her own form of apology. "I'm sorry, Donald. I have to turn down your offer. I'm going by myself."

"That's what you think," Donald retorted. "My Lutheran upbringing didn't give me a strange sense of humor, but it made me plenty stubborn. You haven't heard the end of this discussion yet."

Donald, true to his word, didn't end the discussion until the morning nine weeks later when Sarah boarded the train in Providence. He spent the time in between arguing alternately with Sarah, Albert and Nina about the dangers involved. He ranted and raved, and sulked continuously until the moment he kissed her good-bye at the station.

Her vision blurred by tears, Sarah stared at the three figures standing on the station platform and tried to etch them deeply into her memory. Lurching, with the black smoke belching from its locomotive, Sarah's train began to pull out of the Providence station and the waving figures grew smaller. Sarah waved until she could see them no longer and then wiped away the tears streaming down her face.

The hours dragged by, but Sarah

seemed content to remain quiet and alone, separate from her fellow passengers. Ten-and-a-half hours after leaving Providence, she arrived, begrimed and tired, on the outskirts of the business district of New York City at the terminal on Forty-second Street. As Donald's younger brother Feldon rushed forward to greet her, she tried to make sense of the confusion around her.

Hansoms, their side lights glowing eerily in the gathering darkness, rode past in numbers greater than Sarah had ever imagined. Four-story buildings rose impressively around her. Urchins ran through the station begging, and, in some cases, stealing outright. Old men slept on outlying benches, oblivious to the crowds and hustle and noise around them.

Feldon Rumstick, under explicit instructions from his brother, treated Sarah with utmost consideration. At the Rumstick's family brownstone, Feldon's wife and children greeted Sarah warmly and after dinner settled her in a spacious guest room. After a good night's sleep and a hearty late breakfast the next morning, Sarah was gently shepherded back to the station, placed on the appropriate train and waved on her way to her next destination, Pittsburgh, where Donald had made accommodations in the best hotel.

As Sarah passed through one Eastern city after another, Donald's relatives blurred with strangers met on the trains. Different hotels took on a similar look. Smokestacks, tenements, and office buildings blended with those found in other cities. Only when the train passed over the Mississippi River and onto the bluff which held the city of St. Louis did Sarah begin to feel that a major change had taken place.

After her Pittsburgh layover, Sarah had lost some of her reserve and hesitantly conversed with nearby passengers. She knew a single young woman was an oddity but she hoped older men around Albert's age would be less likely to misconstrue her need to talk; loneliness had begun to take its toll.

By mid-Illinois, Sarah packed away her hat and gloves permanently; she greeted new passengers with a pleasant smile and talked more freely with the old ones.

Now, as the lush hardwoods of the Missouri countryside rolled past, Sarah saw the larger spaces between farms and towns and sensed, for the first time, the immensity of the land she was passing through. The passengers in the car were changing, too. Some women wore styles slightly out-of-date. The few men wearing suits looked uncomfortable, as though they were unaccustomed to such clothes. Farmers, ranchers and cattlemen made up the bulk of the riders, while the dapper Eastern businessman was fast becoming an anomaly.

Kansas City was a virtual cowtown with dirt streets, wooden plank sidewalks, falsefront buildings, and the smell of cattle permeating the air. Once in her room in the Dorillard Hotel, Sarah changed into a demure, high-necked dress that even the Quakers couldn't fault for plainness, walked downstairs and entered the dining room. No conversation stopped. No hushed whispers could be heard. The waiter came to take her order. She ate her meal without interruption. When she returned to her room at a very proper eight o'clock, she was jubilant with this taste of freedom from protocol, little imagining the impression she had made. Her fellow diners, with that peculiar Western tolerance, had calmly assumed that yet another high-class madame had stopped here on her way to lusher fields in the West. No respectable lady would dine alone in public—even in Kansas City, Missouri—in 1873.

When the Kansas Pacific pulled out of the station early the next morning, Sarah saw the first of many herds of rangy cattle being driven toward outlying lots near the junction of river and railroad. Seated directly in front of her was a woman at least ten years her senior.

Sarah caught herself staring at what the newspapers euphemistically called "a frail sister." Sarah had never seen rouged cheeks or painted lips nor did she know that hair could be colored to that particular shade of yellow. The woman's dress was even more shocking. Through the shawl thrown casually over her shoulders, full breasts tilted up and over the top of a low-cut bodice, showing deep cleavage.

The woman, acknowledging the stir she was causing within the car, turned in Sarah's direction and winked at her with a knowing glance. Sarah looked hastily out the coach window. The men chuckled softly, glanced appreciatively at the woman and then turned back to their cards. Sarah silently wished herself anywhere but here in this car with these people.

One of the older businessmen Sarah had categorized as Eastern apparently decided Sarah was respectable enough to speak with. Strolling back to her seat, he asked permission to sit with her a spell and then proceeded to talk nonstop of his many trips across Kansas and Nebraska, first by stagecoach and later by train. He spoke of noisy, disruptive Indians following the coaches for miles, cutting telegraph lines and surrounding trains when the iron monsters first appeared. After cataloging a list of disasters, natural and human, he cheerfully excused himself and returned to his seat.

"Pompous ass," the woman with the painted lips muttered under her breath and turned to face Sarah.

Sarah smiled back at the echo of her own thoughts.

"Couldn't help hearing his long-winded sermon. What a bore! By the way, my name is Mary Lou Watson." She stuck her hand over the seat. Without thinking, Sarah took it.

"I'm Sarah Comstock."

"Mind if I ask you what you're doing here?" Mary Lou asked.

"I'm heading for Central City," Sarah answered with a warmness that startled the woman. Mary Lou had been the first person in three weeks with either the courage or tactlessness to be direct with her. "I have a job there."

"That so?" Mary Lou looked surprised. "I didn't take you for a working woman. Figured you were going to meet your husband or something like that."

"No, I'm not married. I have been working for a few years now." Sarah noticed the cardplayers across the aisle had stopped talking.

"Now that you mention it, you aren't wearing a wedding band or anything. What's your line of business?"

At Mary Lou's question, snickers across the aisle could clearly be heard. Mary Lou sent them a hostile glare and turned back to Sarah.

"Look, I can see you're a lady. If you don't want to talk, fine. I'm used to that. But if those guys give you any trouble, just call on me." She said the last loud enough to be heard the whole length of the car.

Sarah couldn't help her embarrassment, but this time she didn't turn away. Her curiosity, always strong, made her want to know more about Mary Lou Watson.

"I would like to talk with you," Sarah said frankly. "And my embarrassment

◆

'Tisn't beauty, so to speak, nor good talk necessarily. It's just It. Some women'll stay in a man's memory if they once walked down a street.

Ruyard Kipling
Mrs. Bathurst

is my problem, not yours."

Mary Lou's eyebrows shot up. This young woman wasn't as timid as she first thought.

"I'm taking a new kind of job in Colorado," Sarah continued. "I'm going to be a newspaper reporter."

"You've got to be kidding," Mary Lou laughed. "In Central City? Why, if the society dragons don't faint from shock, the mining boys will."

"You know Central City?"

"Sure do. Worked there a couple of years when the boom started back in '60 and '61." She shot a murderous look at the now silent cardplayers. "What you boys looking at? Haven't you ever heard people talking? Why don't you go back to your game and put your ears back on your heads?"

With that last salvo, she patted the seat next to her and asked Sarah to join her. Sarah shrugged. She had gone this far, why not join her?

"Tell me about Central City and Gilpin County," Sarah said.

Mile upon mile of grassy hill country passed and was replaced by flatter, and if possible, dryer land while Mary Lou Watson told of the boom years where tents of canvas and wagons were called home. She explained claim-jumping and vigilante groups, the strict mining codes and easy gambling practices. Without blinking an eyelash, she explained that the dance hall girls weren't one of her kind and matter-of-factly listed the differences among the girl cribs, brothels, and pleasure palaces. Sarah only hoped that her cheeks weren't scarlet.

Listening to Mary Lou's description, it sounded as though Central City was one of a string of towns built in steep Gregory Gulch that seemed composed of a series of shantytowns, mills and mines, denuded of trees or brush, piled high with rubble and slag. Mary Lou hadn't painted a very pretty picture, and Sarah had the feeling that hers was the most honest she had heard. Decency and the decline of her business, as Mary Lou put it, came with the mine managers' wives, their proper manners, and fancified houses.

Sarah hoped that she was nodding at the appropriate times. Mary Lou had a sharp mind and a vivid way of portraying things. Sarah saw a glimmer of kindness, too. Mary Lou had a sense of humor and Sarah found herself liking her company.

When the shadows lengthened and evening descended quickly, as it does on the prairie, Sarah excused herself and went back to her own seat. Curling into a corner, using her cape as a pillow, she settled down to her second night of sleeping on a train.

One hundred miles east of Denver the train began to move at a slower pace. The engine felt an incline barely perceptible to those looking out the windows. Sarah knew they had been steadily climbing since the Mississippi River. Miles later, clouds took on definite shape and became snow-capped peaks atop deep blue-gray forms, rising ever higher into the sky. These mountains were beyond Sarah's wildest imaginings, yet she understood them for what they were—cruel and gentle, frightening and comforting, ugly and filled with an uncompromising beauty. She knew, too, that she'd spend the rest of her life exploring their paradoxes and contradictions.

Sarah's first impression of Denver bordered on amusement. Using Eastern standards, she couldn't consider Denver a city even though there were more people and grander buildings here than in the last six hundred miles put together. But Denver was still a raw, young town. It had a long way to go before polite society and its attendant civilizing forces were established. There were too many saloons, gambling halls, brothels, and opium dens operating openly to believe otherwise.

To Sarah's and Mary Lou's surprise, they both had reserved rooms at the American House, billed the grandest hotel west of the Mississippi and east of Salt Lake City. As they walked into the lobby of the American House Sarah was keenly conscious of the stares thrown at them and wished Mary Lou were dressed differently.

When she emerged several hours later into the red-carpeted elegance of the lobby, Sarah spotted Mary Lou seated in a chair. She immediately arose to greet Sarah warmly, and her impact on Sarah was as jolting as when Sarah had first encountered her on the train. Mary Lou wore a dress of pale blue silk, drawn to a proper bustle in the back and capped at neck and wrist with delicate white lace. A wide-brimmed matching blue hat sat on soft, light brown curls. Gray eyes looked at Sarah with amusement out of a face free of artificial color. Freckles on her well-scrubbed nose gave Mary Lou a younger, more innocent look.

"I'm sorry to shock you again," Mary Lou said, taking Sarah by the arm and steering her toward the door. "I owe you an explanation. But let's go outside where we can talk more freely."

Sarah nodded and allowed herelf to be led. She noticed that Mary Lou's voice had lost its grating harshness. In fact, she could now find very few similarities between this woman and the one on the train.

As they moved along Larimer Street, Mary Lou began talking rapidly, telling Sarah of her life, its deceptions, and the recent cost. Simply put, Mary Lou Watson wasn't a whore nor was that her real name. She was one of an elite group of females working for the Pinkerton Agency based in St. Louis and San Francisco. Sarah hadn't even known there was a Pinkerton Agency, much less the fact that women were allowed to work in dangerous detective positions.

Her name was Marianne Marley. She was the daughter of the man who ran the San Francisco office. Bored by domestic routine, spoiled by her father, and filled with a vivid imagination and steady nerves, Marianne had talked Mr. Marley into doing routine jobs for the agency.

Starting with simple tasks like uncovering information about well known personalities, Marianne had moved into more responsible jobs. Although trained in the use of firearms and physical self-defense, she was rarely placed in positions requiring these. Instead, her main job fell in the category of infiltrating groups or spying on individuals assigned by their clients.

In the past seven years, Mr. Marley had seen his willful daughter change into a most unusual professional agent. Now in her early thirties, Marianne handled cases and clients in her own theatrical style. She loved disguises and the freedom they gave her. She could go places and see things barred to a proper young lady, simply by adopting one of her several thoroughly convincing guises.

"Why did you dress like that on the train?" Sarah asked as they entered the Western equivalent of a small tearoom more than an hour later. "You drew more attention to yourself that way."

"I don't agree. People saw what I was and didn't really focus on me. Besides that, excepting you, no one dared talk with me. I didn't need to get involved in lies that could have proved harmful later. I found what I was looking for, completed the job efficiently, and ended Mary Lou's identity at the American House. She checked out three hours ago and I sauntered in shortly thereafter."

"I'm thoroughly confused," Sarah said, trying to make sense of all that Marianne had told her.

"Names of clients and the specifics of a case are confidential, but I can tell you I was following a man on the train, the one I called a pompous ass.

"He was leaving a company in St. Louis to work for another in Park City, Utah. One problem existed. He was bringing more than himself. In fact, when I examined that satchel he carried with him, I found what his old employer suspected: plans and designs for a refinery that would be very valuable to his new company—more valuable than himself, I bet."

"What did you do about it?" Sarah asked, caught up in the story.

"I took them. It was easy enough when the train stopped at that pretty spring and everyone got out to freshen up. Remember? They've already been returned by private messenger service to their rightful owners." Marianne giggled unexpectedly. "Wait until our friend arrives in Park City. I'd hate to be in his shoes."

"Wasn't that stealing?" Sarah asked.

"I don't consider what I've done stealing," Marianne said with a little wave of her hand. "It's a job. The man was wrong and I helped right that wrong."

"You puzzled me on the train but not half as much as now," Sarah admitted at last. "Why tell me your real identity and this long story?"

"I'm not certain. Let me try to explain. Lately, even with all my disguises and play-acting, I've been unhappy. I haven't been home in five months and traveling's been a lot more lonely than I thought possible. You're the first person I've run into who's been friendly and kind without judging. Can you imagine most people's reaction to my life? So I figured that if you could be friends with someone like Mary Lou Watson, you'd be able to stand me!"

Sarah was surprised to see Marianne looking ill at ease. "I know how lonely it gets," Sarah said, seeking to reassure her. "Don't make me out to be a saint who accepts everything though. I was horrified by you on the train and relieved when you left me in the hotel."

"I could tell," Marianne said laughing. "But you didn't treat me like dirt or that somehow you were better than me. If you felt that way, you hid it well. You're like a breath of fresh air but you'll land your naive little self in big trouble like that one of these days. Please listen to me and be a little more cautious in the future."

During the next few days their friendship blossomed and with Marianne's help Sarah began to know Denver almost intimately. Finally, Marianne heard from her father and found that she was assigned to work in Georgetown, the next county over from Gilpin. Marianne described it as beautiful compared to the gulch Sarah would be working in.

It was a two-hour ride for Sarah from Denver to Black Hawk. She left Denver grateful for all she had seen and especially grateful for Marianne's friendship. She was sure she would see her soon again and by now confident she could penetrate one of her disguises.

At Black Hawk Sarah had no trouble finding the stage to Central City. It was a bouncy journey up a rutted road, past a bewildering tangle of shanties, houses, mining shafts, and mills. Marianne's vivid description had done justice to the ugliness of the gulch. Still, despite the grimness of the land, Sarah was excited by the energy she felt here.

The driver of the stage carelessly threw her baggage to the ground and Sarah climbed out. She had been deposited on Eureka Street in front of the Teller House, the one famed for its grand piano and fine furnishings. She read the signs on the storefronts around her and saw the welcome words, Central City *Clarion*, less than a block away.

Sarah picked up her baggage and slowly approached the doorway, silently counting to ten to compose herself and stop the furious pounding of her heart. When she walked into the office, a bell attached to the door tinkled merrily. A large, stockily-built man with a mane of steely gray hair came out of a back room, wiping his hands on a green printer's apron.

"Don't tell me now, friend," Jack Langhorne boomed in a hearty voice. "Anna, come on out front. Our Miss Comstock has arrived at last."

Carlo Ghiberti's thoughts while he climbed the steep road back to Central City were on his negotiations with the Denver, South Park & Pacific—work he didn't look forward to but would do well. After ten minutes of strenuous walking he began to breathe deeply and forget about the upcoming negotiations, and let himself relax for the first time in days.

He crossed the street to go to his room at the Teller House and saw a tall figure emerge from the *Clarion* office down the block and hurry toward the hotel. He also noticed the stage rumbling past, heading for the same destination.

Only when Carlo stepped into the lighted entrance of the Teller House did he become fully aware of both. With a startled jolt he stared at the tall figure, for she looked surprisingly like Sarah Comsock. As if that alone weren't sufficient, he saw the woman throw her arms around a stagecoach passenger, the gaudiest whore Carlo ever had the privilege of seeing in public. Carlo stood rooted to the spot, incapable of moving.

"Mary Lou, it's really you," Sarah was crying, delight written on her face. "It's so good to see you again."

Carlo couldn't detect the other woman's response but distinctly heard their laughter as they linked arms and disappeared around the back of the stage. By the time he came to his senses, they had moved out of sight. Carlo turned sharply away from the hotel and walked into the nearest bar. After two whiskys taken neat, he had convinced himself that his imagination had played tricks on him.

That woman only resembled Sarah Comstock because of her unusual height, he reasoned carefully. Sarah was a strange creature but not strange enough to associate with prostitutes. Anyway, his argument continued, there was no way on God's earth she'd be living here.

The next morning his convictions had faltered enough to lead him down Eureka Street. The woman had come from the *Clarion* office the night before, if his memory served him correctly. He had nothing to lose by stopping in there now to make a discreet inquiry.

Carlo wasn't sure what he would say once inside the *Clarion* office, but to satisfy his curiosity he needed to begin there. The bell was answered by a big bear of a man with a shock of white hair.

"Can I help you, friend?"

"I'm not sure," Carlo answered truthfully enough. One look at the man's size and stern face and Carlo decided to come straight to the point. "Is there a woman named Sarah Comstock connected with this paper?"

"That's public knowledge so I'll answer you. Yup, she's a reporter and a better one you won't find for miles around. Now, it's my turn for questioning. Why do you ask?"

"I'm an acquaintance of hers from the East. I was surprised when I saw her last night. I thought I was imagining things. You see, I just arrived in town. She's a reporter, you say. How long has she been here?"

The man leaned back in his chair

until it rested on two legs. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"I'm Jack Langhorne, the editor here. And I'm knowing you're Mr. Carlo Ghiberti, one of Nathaniel P. Hill's minions. I'm also knowing that Miss Comstock is busy and unable to see you. Do you get my meaning, friend?"

All this was said in an amicable tone that jarred with the hostile words.

"I'm not a minion," Carlo corrected quietly. "Nor do I get your meaning, friend."

"Glad to spell it out for you then. Nothing personal, it's just that Miss Comstock's building a life for herself here, and the last thing she needs is someone like you coming round."

"She's a little old to have a guardian," Carlo said matter-of-factly. "I'd say she's old enough to speak her own mind about whom she'll see or not see."

"You're right on that point, friend," Jack said with a mirthless laugh. "I thought I'd save you a lot of bother."

"Wait one minute," Carlo began, his voice suddenly hard. "I don't like your attitude *or* your answers, and—"

"How do you suppose I know your name?" Jack interrupted, without looking up from his work. "Simple enough. Sarah's mentioned you and, in the very same breath, her wish not to see you."

Carlo let Jack's words sink in and then came to a decision. "Where can I find her?"

"You sure you want to do that, friend? Sarah's got some temper."

"That's for me to deal with, not you."

"Okay. You ready for this one?" Amusement was written all over Jack's face. "She's at Ma Kittredge's up in Nevadaville. Out by the cemetery, if you're not familiar with our houses of ill-repute. Oh, don't look so shocked. Where do you think our stories on the frail sisters come from?"

"I should have known," Carlo managed to mutter, groping for words. "Thanks."

"Don't go thanking me until you've seen her. I wouldn't want to be in your shoes."

Carlo started to leave but stopped when he reached the door, his mind functioning once again. "If you want to talk about Nathaniel Hill sometime, I'm more than willing. It sounds like you have a lopsided opinion of the man. Maybe I can provide a different point of view."

"Sure," replied Langhorne. "Always open to hearing from the opposition."

Carlo shook his head in disgust. Crusaders weren't his favorite people. He slammed the door behind him and headed up Eureka Street, following the dirt path as it climbed and turned westward. Carefully avoiding the ore wagons hurtling past him from the mines above Nevadaville, he reached the fork in the road where both the cemetery and Ma Kittredge's house stood.

Once here, Carlo felt a twinge of uncertainty creep into his angry thoughts. He couldn't very well knock on Ma's door and ask for Sarah. If he wanted to see her, he'd have to wait here in this sorry excuse for a graveyard.

As he wandered among the crude granite stones, Carlo tried to find one good reason for wasting his time on this woman. He was infuriated with the way she kept popping up in his life under the most absurd conditions. When she came out of Ma's, he knew he was going to confront her for her own good. She needed a good shaking-up; no woman associated with whores unless she was one herself. Sarah Comstock needed to learn that she couldn't live by her own rules. No wonder her father had given up on her. Probably Donald had, too. Any reasonable man would, except misguided crusaders like Jack Langhorne.

When Sarah walked out of Ma Kittredge's front door and across the dirt road to the cemetery, Carlo's thoughts had reached an admirable level of righteous indignation.

"I thought I recognized you, Carlo," Sarah said calmly, ignoring his glowering expression. "Even in a dusty cemetery, you manage to look attractive. You've upset the girls though by hanging around outside. They're nervous enough with my reporting and they fear retaliation. I think it best if we head back for town."

Carlo looked at Sarah carefully. He had forgotten how striking she could be with that thick dark hair and those deep-set eyes. The simple design of her dress followed the slimness and curves of her body perfectly. But Sarah had changed in the past year and a half. The sheltered young girl was gone. In her place stood a poised woman, acting with quiet assurance.

"Well, Carlo, are you going to stand there staring at me forever?" she asked, taking his arm and leading him out of the cemetery.

"No." He let his stride fall into step with hers. "I'm sorry if I caused the girls some problems. I didn't know where else to wait for you."

"Jack told you I was here?"

He nodded his head affirmatively.

"I doubt whether you're sorry about the girls. More likely, you've never considered their feelings or the fact they have feelings."

Carlo winced at the bluntness of her words, her observation hitting close to home.

"Carlo, I tend to be tactless when I'm upset," she replied, noticing his reaction. "I watched one of Ma's girls die less than an hour ago. She took enough laudanum to kill a dozen mules. It happens all the time, but it still makes me angry at everything and everyone letting this kind of degradation go on. Men, the girls themselves, those who live off it. It makes me sick."

"Jack Langhorne's certainly made a big impression on you," Carlo snapped. "You turn from a sheltered Quakeress into a grand crusader, defending the public morals. And you make a fool of yourself in the bargain."

Sarah stopped walking and turned to face Carlo, her hands on her hips, her eyes blazing.

"What I do with my life is my business. If I choose to be a fool or crusader, a prostitute or a model of propriety—that's my concern, not yours. I don't judge you or your way of life. I'd appreciate the same courtesy from you."

"I don't believe that," Carlo came back quickly. "I think you've judged me plenty and found me and my way of life wanting. Why else would you tell Langhorne that you didn't care to see me?"

"You're right." A small smile softened Sarah's face. "But do you blame me after the last time I saw you?"

"No," admitted Carlo. "I treated you badly then. But I was right about one thing that night."

Sarah looked at him questioningly. "About growing up and marriage to Donald?"

"You remember? That's flattering. I expected you two to marry and settle happily in New England. I couldn't believe my eyes last night when I saw you with that, uh, that other woman." He decided not to mention Albert's recent letter about Donald.

"You don't dare say the word whore in my presence yet you come out with the most outrageous things about how I should live my life. Why are you so concerned about me? Why look me up again like you did two years ago? What do you want?"

Carlo ran his fingers through his hair. His exasperation with the direction their conversation had taken was apparent.

"I'd rather not say," replied Carlo.

"Or can't?" she retorted.

"No, I guess I can't. It might have something to do with the fact that every time I run into you, you manage to shock the hell out of me. Sarah, don't ask me to explain why I'm doing something I can't understand myself."

Sarah heard the frustration in his voice but knew she needed to drive home her point. "When it concerns me, I have to ask why. But for now, I think we'd better call for a truce between us. I'll try not to shock you while you're in Central City and you'll stop trying to run my life. Okay?"

"I'll call a truce to our hostilities but only if you let me take you to lunch at the Teller House."

Sarah flushed and began walking again rapidly. "I'm sorry, Carlo. I'd prefer not seeing you again."

He grabbed her arm, for it suddenly was important that she not turn away from him. "Why? At least tell me why?"

"It's obvious, isn't it? We have nothing in common. We only seem to bring out the worst in each other the few times we've met. Let's leave well enough alone."

Sarah hoped she sounded convincing and that her act of cool indifference masked the turmoil she was feeling. She didn't want Carlo seeing how deeply he could affect her. It had been that way ever since the night of the festival when she was no more than sixteen years old.

Carlo heard her negative reply but sensed a warmth behind her cool detachment. Impulsively, he reached over and took her hand with unusual gentleness.

"Sarah, I know what you're saying is true but I don't want us to part again angry with one another.

"I know we're different Sarah. We were born and raised less than a mile apart, but it could have been at opposite ends of the earth for all the similarities between us. I don't understand you and I manage to offend you most of the time. I won't say I can't help it. I have no desire to change to please someone else."

"No one's asking you to change."

"I know that," exclaimed Carlo. "What I'm trying to say is that we're both happy being what we are. We're different, but that doesn't mean we can't be friends."

"I'm afraid I'm not as clear about this as you," Sarah began haltingly. "I'm not sure we could be friends. It didn't work with Donald. One of my reasons for coming out here was to get away from him and marriage. I don't care to be involved with any man."

"For heaven's sake, who's talking about marriage?" Carlo dropped her hand and glared at her. "I've told you my views on women and marriage, and—I can assure you—they haven't changed in the past two years. Anyway, the last thing I'd do is take up with someone like you."

Carlo saw her flinch and realized he had blundered once again. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that as an insult. You're an exceptionally beautiful woman with a fine head on your shoulders. Any man would be proud to be seen with you."

Sarah bit back the words she was about to throw at him for, at that moment, miners from the shafts above Nevadaville appeared in view. Carlo and she moved quickly out of the road to let the men go past. Throughout the gulch, shifts changed at the noon hour with groups of singing Cornishmen going to and from the mines, their equipment and food boxes in hand.

"Hiya, Miss Comstock," one of the miners now called to her, the thick accent peculiar to Cornwall evident. He stepped out of the marching column and doffed his hat. "My sister was right pleased with the help you gave her the other day. I don't know how to thank you."

"Then don't," Sarah said with a laugh. "But I'll tell you what you can do, Stu. I need help moving out of the Langhornes next Sunday. I don't have much—trunks, books, that kind of thing. My new place is furnished."

"I'll gladly do it but not for money. I'll get my brother and some other men to help, too. How early?"

Carlo noted the eagerness with which this hard-working miner offered his services on his one day off. He'd have to be blind not to see the admiration written on the man's face, too. Carlo felt an uneasy twinge. The Cornishman couldn't be much older than Sarah and cleaned up, he'd cut a handsome figure in some women's estimation. They were talking and laughing easily and ignoring Carlo. None of the tension he had felt with Sarah was present.

"I can help you move, too," Carlo found himself saying to Stu and Sarah, although, until a moment ago, he had no intention of staying in Central City.

Stu took one look at Carlo's fine clothes and laughed heartily. "That's all right. We'll manage fine. It's no bother." He took one last lingering look at Sarah before heading down the road again, whistling happily.

"I'm glad you don't care to become involved with men," Carlo said sarcastically after Stu was out of hearing distance. "What do you call that adoring puppy dog of a Cousin Jack?"

Sarah threw her head back and laughed. "You're so self-righteous, like a mother hen and village priest rolled into one. That adoring puppy dog happens to be Stuart Thomas, a happily married man with two children. I'm good friends with his whole family, including his wife. I helped her when she had childbirth fever. I also helped clear his sister's good name when she made the mistake of working in one of the dance halls on Saturday nights to earn a few extra dollars. His brother-in-law wasn't exactly understanding, but I did get the truth through his rather thick skull."

"Would you care to continue your saga of domestic fence-mending over lunch?" Carlo interrupted.

"Fine, except I'm short on money right now."

"Good heavens, does everything have to turn into a major struggle between us? I'd like to pay for your lunch since I invited you. Will your conscience allow that?" Carlo smiled good-naturedly.

"Talk about being a strong-willed creature," Sarah said linking her arm through his. "I'm starved. You win. Let's go."

With that, they headed down to Central City and lunch, with Carlo keeping up his end of a bantering conversation. He had known that Sarah had a quick mind and an even quicker wit. What he hadn't realized was the full extent of her education under the Claxtons' tutelage. More intriguing, Carlo sensed a core of sweetness and common sense lay hidden beneath her bristling exterior.

Two hours passed quickly and the dining room emptied of patrons, but neither Carlo nor Sarah seemed to notice. She told him about her trip cross-country, ending with the tale of Marianne Marley. Carlo shared stories of his travels and amusing anecdotes about the folly of living in mining towns. He couldn't remember the last time he enjoyed a woman's company so thoroughly.

In the daylight of the hotel dining room, Sarah caught herself examining his long slender fingers, his impenetrably dark eyes, his high cheekbones and full mouth. She knew she was attracted to him physically and enjoyed the feeling that flowed between them during those two hours.

Carlo had not lied when he had asked Sarah to be a friend. Only now he found himself openly flirting with her, swept along by a current that ran much deeper. Crazy as it sounded to him, Sarah reminded him of the sea, ever-changing and mysterious. Sarah was no simple conquest. In fact, from what he already knew, she would be offended by that term and all that it implied. She would do things in her own way, in her own time.

His speculations came to an abrupt halt and the growing intimacy between them was shattered when a well-dressed, attractive woman came running into the dining room and stood before their table.

"Sarah, I've been looking all over the place for you, and Mr. Langhorne is frantic. He even went up to Ma's and when he heard you left with a stranger, he—" She stopped in mid-sentence and looked at Carlo for the first time. "I know. You're the big bad stranger and I've just made a perfect idiot of myself." She laughed and held her hand out to him. "I'm Marianne Marley and you're the minion who has Langhorne's dander up."

Carlo stood up, gave a little bow and kissed Marianne's gloved hand. "As I told Editor Langhorne, I'm not a minion and Sarah's old enough to take care of herself."

"You're Carlo Ghiberti."

"And you're an infamous agent."

"Sarah, you've told him about me!"

"How could I skip the best part of my trip?" Sarah asked, smiling at them both. "I'm so glad you two are meeting. I was afraid one or the other of you would leave town before that could happen."

Carlo was startled by her remark and suspicious, too. He wouldn't put it past Sarah to try to palm him off on her good friend. Granted, Marianne was a remarkably pretty woman, pert and bubbly, full of curves and smiles, but her brand of cheerfulness and energy didn't appeal to him.

Unexpectedly, he began to smile boyishly and his eyes filled with a look of pure mischief. "How long are you planning to be in Central City?" he asked Marianne, focusing his attention exclusively on her.

"If I'm lucky, two weeks. That is, if I don't die of boredom while Sarah's busy straightening out the world."

"Maybe I can be of help. I should be here for at least that long." Carlo gulped slightly at his again, newly revised change in plans. "Another dear friend of Sarah's is coming here very soon, which should liven things up in this dreary gulch."

Carlo could feel Sarah's piercing look and continued smoothly. "This will be Donald Rumstick's first visit to Colorado. After years of trying to persuade him to make the trip, he's suddenly decided that he wants to see the territory before winter sets in."

"How do you know that?" Sarah asked.

Her voice had a slight quaver which hit Carlo strangely, and he wondered whether his assumption about Donald and Sarah had been wrong.

"You didn't know about Donald's plans?"

Sarah shook her head.

"I just found out myself. Donald hasn't written in months. Albert Claxton sent the news." Carlo looked perplexed. "It isn't like Donald to be so secretive. First, he doesn't let me know you're living in Central City, and now he doesn't tell you he's arriving here next week."

"I asked him not to write you about my living in Colorado," Sarah confessed sheepishly. "If he was secretive, it was at my request. I'm sorry. As for his coming here, I'm as puzzled as you."

"It's fairly obvious," Marianne interjected. "He's coming to see Sarah. He's given her enough time to become good and lonely. Now he'll breeze into town and sweep her off her feet and into the blessed state of matrimony."

"That's marvelous, Marianne," Carlo laughed heartily. "Well, good luck to him."

"And what do you mean by that remark, Carlo Ghiberti?" Sarah arose from her chair and leaned across the table. "You might find it implausible that someone would travel two thousand miles to see me, but I don't." With that said, Sarah stormed out of the room.

"I'd say we both made a big mistake," Marianne said.

They sat in morose silence, each deep in thought. Finally, Carlo looked at Marianne and asked softly, "Does she love him?"

"I don't know. He sounds like a terrific guy."

"He is. A loyal friend and a great person."

Marianne sat back quietly and listened while Carlo told her of his friendship with Donald and his encounters with Sarah over the years. Marianne thought Carlo a very attractive man, although too intense and opinionated for her liking. She was also aware he was in love with Sarah, yet hadn't come to terms with that himself.

"Sarah's lucky to have a friend like you," Carlo said warmly. "Thanks for listening."

"I'm glad I got to know you, Carlo," Marianne answered. "And I'm going to give you some unasked-for advice. I haven't known Sarah long but we've become close quickly. She's lived a lifetime of suffering already. I don't want to see her receive more. And I think we both know you could hurt her easily."

She stood and gave Carlo a light kiss on the cheek before leaving the dining room. Carlo settled the bill and went upstairs to his room. There, he stretched out on his bed and stared at the ceiling, Marianne's warning still ringing in his ears.

After an hour, Carlo got up, wrote two short notes and packed his bag. When he checked out of the Teller House, he asked a young boy to deliver the notes in the morning, one to Nathaniel Hill, the other to Sarah in care of the *Clarion* office.

He caught the four o'clock train out of Black Hawk and arrived in Denver before dark. Once settled in his rooms at the Francis, a small boardinghouse on a quiet side street, he began working immediately. When he put his work aside hours later, exhausted, he allowed himself to think of Sarah. He had written that note to her and left Gregory Gulch before he lost his resolve. He was falling in love with Sarah, clear and simple. Sarah had a life of her own in Central City. Moreover, she'd be the last person on earth to follow any man around, living her life through his.

Tomorrow, Nathaniel Hill would read his letter asking permission to work away from Gregory Gulch over the next half year.

Carlo's letter was waiting when Sarah and Marianne arrived at the *Clarion* offices the next morning.

"Ah," said Marianne, "let's see what Carlo has to say for himself. I bet it's an apology."

"That man," Sarah sputtered. "Of all the conceited things to do. Take a look at this for yourself."

When Marianne finished reading the letter, she sighed. "Ah, the mysteries of life and love."

"What do you mean, mysteries?"

"Do you want an honest answer or will you go storming out like you did yesterday?"

Sarah looked sheepish. "I don't plan to make a habit of it. Fire away."

"Simply put, Carlo's fallen for you and doesn't know how to handle that awesome fact. So he's decided to keep his distance until his ardor cools or you conveniently fall in love with another man or some other form of divine intervention saves him from your clutches. The mystery part is that he thinks he's doing all this for you, of course. He's self-sacrificing his love for you on the altar of altruism."

"Oh, Marianne, stop being funny. I've lost my sense of humor the past two days. First, I hear that news about Donald and now you joke about Carlo."

Marianne walked over to Sarah and patted her shoulder. "Carlo has a way of getting through that protective armor of yours, doesn't he?"

Sarah's eyes brimmed with unexpected tears and two bright spots of color stood out prominently on her cheeks. "See these tears, Marianne? They're tears of anger. You can be damn sure I'll not shed a tear of sadness over him."

"Then I'd like to suggest you tell him, not me," her friend commented dryly.

"Don't worry, I will." Sarah furiously wiped away the tears with the back of her hand. "Carlo's had the upper hand since the day I met him. And it's about time the tables were turned. He may think this ends the matter, but he hasn't seen the last of me yet."

Marianne applauded. "Great. Already I'm beginning to feel sorry for Carlo."

"Don't. He'll only get what he deserves."

Sarah had wheedled two days off so that she and Marianne could go to Denver. That afternoon when Sarah saw Denver for the second time, she looked at it from a new perspective. After Gregory Gulch, the city seemed quiet and dignified. Their two-day vacation—crowded with visits to enjoyable restaurants, theaters, and shops—passed much too quickly. Yet when the Colorado Central began the long climb back to Gregory Gulch, Sarah was secretly glad to be returning. Despite its noise, filth, and dirty air, the gulch was home for Sarah.

When the stage pulled to a stop on Eureka Street, Marianne saw the expression on Sarah's face change almost instantaneously. A tall blond man was entering the Teller House, and Sarah pointed to his retreating form angrily.

"That's Donald Rumstick."

"Now, Sarah," Marianne began, her soothing voice raised to be heard above the din. "The first thing I'd recommend is taking that murderous look off your face. There's nothing wrong with Donald's being in Central City, and you've had fair warning. Don't go snapping his head off without giving him a chance to explain." She grabbed Sarah's arm. "Where do you think you're going? You haven't heard a word I've said."

"Into the Teller House. It seems to be my place of reckoning these days."

Marianne shook her head and followed her friend docilely. Sarah marched into the hotel and demanded the number of Donald's room.

A deep male voice answered Sarah's insistent knocking but before the voice's owner could reach the door, Sarah opened it.

"Donald Rumstick," she announced angrily, "I know you're here in Central City, so don't go hiding in a hotel room."

"I didn't realize I was keeping it a secret from you, Sarah, since I've been the one waiting for you to return for almost two days now."

He approached her quietly, unruffled by her dramatic entrance. "You always manage to look good, even during your angriest moments." He leaned over and kissed her gently on the cheek. "I've missed you."

Sarah began to turn red as her anger subsided and gave way to confusion. Much to Marianne's surprise, Sarah did the unexpected. She hugged Donald warmly.

"You're absolutely correct, as usual. I barge in here and accuse you of hiding when you've been waiting for me for two days."

Donald took this swift change in mood in stride and began laughing heartily. Then he turned and noticed Marianne for the first time and wondered how he could have over overlooked her.

Sarah noticed Donald's appreciative glance and thought she saw a possible solution to her dilemma.

The three agreed to meet for dinner that evening and, at Donald's insistence, they included the Langhornes in their plans. While Donald had been waiting for Sarah's return, Jack and Anna had graciously shown him around the area.

Donald was quick to notice that there were no accountants in business in Central City, except those working for the Boston & Colorado. He filed away that piece of information for possible future reference and continued his examination of the town, smelter, and the *Clarion*. Shortly before Sarah's return, he had made some practical and basic bookkeeping suggestions to the Langhornes.

Tonight Jack and Anna were similarly pleased with Donald, this time over their dinner invitation. They took a rare evening off from their work, glad to be with this nice young man who was Sarah's suitor. To their dismay, as dinner progressed Donald showed more interest in Sarah's friend than in their employee.

Sarah was secretly delighted with Marianne's and Donald's budding friendship. As for Marianne herself, she was soon busy telling Sarah how inaccurate her description of Donald had been.

On Friday morning, the opportunity Sarah had been seeking landed directly in her lap. Jack wanted to examine the possibility of Gilpin County becoming fuelless in a few short years, thanks to the operation of the Black Hawk smelter. Vast tracts of land had been cleared, leaving only those trees too hazardous to cut or too expensive to cart to the smelter. Hill was now beginning to convert the smelter to coal, but the cost of transporting this fuel to the gulch was prohibitive.

Sarah volunteered to do the research and by late Friday she had written a reasoned treatise, which Jack gleefully published in the Saturday edition. In a far less gleeful mood, Nathaniel Hill called on the *Clarion* an hour after the paper hit the street. Sarah was helping Anna clear the trays when she heard Jack page her.

"Yes?" she said questioningly as she emerged from the back room. A dapper little man in his mid-forties stood looking up into Jack's face, his expression angry but controlled.

"Sarah," bellowed Jack. "Meet Mr. Nathaniel Peter Hill of the Boston & Colorado Smelting Company."

Sarah held out her hand to Hill. "I thought you'd stop by once you read the article."

"Pleased to meet you," replied Hill, his good manners automatically coming to the fore.

Sarah nodded and waited for him to speak his piece.

"I find your figures on the fuel cost, both coal and wood, most interesting since they agree with rough calculations I've been making with much the same point of view in mind. For many complex reasons, I feel that the smelter's days in Black Hawk are numbered. Now is not the proper time to consider a move to a more feasible location. Excuse me for staring, Miss Comstock. I admit I'm surprised to find the writer of such a technical article to be a woman."

Hill glanced in Jack's direction before continuing. "I had actually come here thinking to offer the writer a job with my company. Heavens knows, we need people with vision, who can think of alternative systems. Naturally, it would be quite unsuitable to employ a woman for such a position."

Sarah was enjoying herself as Hill became more and more deeply mired in his pompous speech. Hiding her smile, she interrupted him in mid-sentence. "Do you usually make such offers in the presence of that person's employer?" she asked in a friendly tone. "And do men usually jump at the opportunity to work for you?"

Hill looked at Sarah intently, thinking her a cheeky young thing with her impertinent questions. "Since I wasn't making an offer, I feel it proper to inform your guardian of my mistaken intentions. And yes, men eagerly take advantage of the opportunity to work for my company since we have an excellent reputation for dependability, generous salaries, and good working conditions."

"You're mistaken about Mr. Langhorne," Sarah said quietly. "He's not my guardian. I'm old enough to take care of myself."

"I'm sure you are," said Hill, barely hiding the sarcasm in his voice.

"As for your company, I can only agree with what you've said." Sarah ignored Jack's hostile look. "A friend of mine, Mr. Carlo Ghiberti, has nothing but the highest praise for you and your company."

To Sarah's surprise, Hill looked uncomfortable again, although her remark had been meant as a compliment. Hill searched his memory trying to recall a reference to this extraordinary woman and found it impossible since Carlo and he rarely discussed anything personal. Hill had briefly suspected Carlo's sudden departure from Central City had been due to problems—gambling or women perhaps—but it was not in his nature to ask.

Now Hill realized that his suspicion had not been far off the mark. This Miss Comstock certainly was a woman capable of causing trouble for any man. He decided instantly to see to it that Carlo remained far from Central City.

"Carlo Ghiberti is an exceptional employee. We're fortunate to have his services," Hill replied in clipped tones.

"Our company and his work there have become his life."

Hill made this last comment hoping that Sarah would take particular note of it.

"Thank you for sharing so much. You have been most informative," replied Sarah politely, thinking meanwhile that a list of Hill's traits would never include subtlety.

"My pleasure, Miss Comstock. Now, if I may, I'll wish you both a good day and take my leave." Hill bowed ever so slightly and quietly left the office.

"Thunderation!" exclaimed Jack. "That man claims he's not upset over the article. Sure, he's been thinking of moving. Right!"

Ignoring Jack's muttering, Sarah returned to the back room and began helping Anna again, her thoughts on the interview. Hill tended to take himself too seriously and was rather severe for Sarah's taste. On the other hand, he certainly wasn't the villain Jack wished to portray. An ambitious Territory striving for statehood needed ambitious men.

Sarah was puzzled by Hill's icy manner after she mentioned Carlo's name, although she had no trouble understanding his veiled warning about the role of women in Carlo's life. She shared her impressions of Hill the next morning with Donald and Marianne as they waited for Stuart Thomas and his friends at the Langhorne house.

"You say he holds Carlo in good esteem?" Donald asked.

Sarah imitated Hill's clipped tones: "'Carlo Ghiberti is an exceptional employee. We're fortunate to have his services.' Hill doesn't hold *me* in good esteem, though. I've offended him somehow."

"Probably a combination of your sweet, docile manner and that lovely little article about his smelter," Marianne said.

"Marianne's told me you and Carlo are friends again," said Donald. "I'm glad to hear that."

"I'm glad you approve, but I still wouldn't call us friends," Sarah retorted.

"I might ask Hill for a job someday."

"You?" Sarah asked incredulous.

Donald nodded and began to talk hesitantly about spending the winter in Central City, if his partner could spare him from their accounting firm.

Stuart Thomas and his friends pulled up to the doorstep before Sarah could respond to Donald's plans. They went straight to work, loading their wagon with crates and boxes and bundles of books. By the end of the first hour, Sarah's belongings were piled in the back with plenty of room to spare for the Cornishmen.

Sarah rode up front with Stu while Donald and Marianne offered to walk beside the wagon as it wound its way out Eureka Street along the road to Nevadaville. When the moving party reached the narrow path on the left leading toward Glory Hole, Sarah's new home, Donald and Marianne had fallen far behind, engaged in yet another of their animated conversations.

Sarah smiled happily before climbing down from the wagon when they finally arrived. Although the cabin was relatively large, she was surprised how quickly crowded it became as the men deposited her belongings in the three rooms.

When Stu and his friends left, Sarah gazed about her with satisfaction. The kitchen and pantry to the rear of the main room were in excellent condition. The front room had a massive stone fireplace on one wall that the previous owner had built with loving attention to detail and an eye for the inherent beauty of the igneous rocks chosen.

When they finally quit cleaning and unpacking, it was after dark, and Donald produced a bottle of sherry. The trio sat on crates before the fire and toasted Sarah's new home. Reluctantly, Donald left to return to the less cheerful Teller House.

Stretching out on a blanket in front of the fire, Sarah looked fondly at her friend. "Marianne, I've been doing a lot of thinking about marriage to Donald. When he asks, I may go through with it."

Sarah wondered how consummate an actress she was, for her announcement sounded ludicrous to her.

"That's nice, Sarah," replied a tight-lipped Marianne politely.

"That's all you have to say to your best friend as she contemplates the biggest step in her life?"

"What do you want me to say? You'll make a splendid couple? You'll live happily ever after?" Marianne spat the words at her.

"I thought you might," Sarah said lamely. Finally, she threw her hands in the air. "Marianne, I could never do your job. I'm making a mess of this."

Marianne looked at Sarah strangely. "What are you talking about?"

"My attempts to ferret out the truth." Sarah saw that look of confusion deepen on her friend's face. "About Donald."

"Don't you know how you feel about him since you're planning to marry him?" asked Marianne acidly.

"But I'm not."

Marianne looked more perplexed than ever. "Shall we start this all again?"

"I was trying, in my own awkward way, to find out how you feel about Donald. I know how I feel. I love him as a dear friend, that's all. I've been wanting to know how he's affected you."

Sarah came over and knelt in front of Marianne. "Haven't you two discovered what's been obvious to me the past three days?"

Slowly Marianne began to understand Sarah's words and didn't know whether to hug her or laugh at her bungled attempts at deception. She did both.

"Poor Donald," Marianne exclaimed, catching her breath at last. "I bet he doesn't have an inkling of your thoughts. We haven't even known each other a single week and you probably have us married for a lifetime."

"Don't you understand what I'm saying?" Sarah insisted. "You're both free to marry now without my standing between you. Donald and I together would be disastrous, and I think he realizes that, too. I'm planning to talk with him. I want to do it without hurting him or losing his friendship. You and Donald both mean so much to me."

Marianne was touched by Sarah's words for her friend rarely let her see such warmth or attachment. "You know I feel the same. As for falling in love with Donald, time will just have to run its course. And I am glad you know your own mind about marriage to him."

"I'm not sure about marriage for myself to anybody," Sarah said in a small voice, "and I'm stuck when I think beyond today. Sometimes I feel like impossible odds are stacked against me."

Marianne squeezed Sarah's hands. "Don't give up. You once told me your sister did just that. I think you're made of stronger stuff."

"I know I am but I'm afraid of turning into the epitome of the wasp-tongued spinster."

Marianne burst out laughing at Sarah's melodramatic presentation of her future. "I have trouble believing you were raised a quiet, somber little Quaker. They must have had their hands full coping with you."

Sarah looked down for a moment before answering. "They sure did. You know, most people have a very difficult time with me, present company occasionally excepted. And I've never grown used to it, as much as I pretend I don't care."

"Sarah Comstock, I like the way you're different and maybe someday you'll believe that. In the meantime, you always tell me, take care of today and tomorrow will take care of itself. Well, practice what thee preaches!"

In the period of the next two months things moved very swiftly. Donald Rumstick became a member of the Boston & Colorado, having impressed Nathanial Hill with his sterling qualities. Shortly afterward, Marianne's father, worried about the fact that he had heard nothing from his roving daughter for over two months, made an abrupt visit to Central City, met and heartily approved of Donald Rumstick. With that support behind him, Donald promptly made what Marianne considered a ludricrous proposal with her father listening in the wings and in short order Marianne and Donald were married.

Meanwhile, Sarah had been busy writing a daring series of exposé articles on the suicide and abortion cases among the girls in Denver's best-known houses of prostitution. These articles were the basis for the initiation of a medical program for prostitutes that she instituted with the help of Dr. Michael Williams.

Carlo had just finished a long session with Nathanial Hill. It was clear now that Hill needed him back in Central City and it had become, in the intervening months, clear to Carlo that as much as he tried, he couldn't seem to break free from thoughts of Sarah. And since she had come to dominate his thoughts so thoroughly, Carlo knew he had to settle whatever existed between them once and for all.

He had dined with the Rumsticks three times now since his arrival in Gilpin County and he was positive this last invitation would have included Sarah. Much to his surprise, he was wrong. Marianne had chatted pleasantly about her during dinner, little tidbits that told of their closeness. Carlo hoped he had not shown any unusual interest, for he had yet to make a move to talk with Sarah. In fact, he had been going out of his way to avoid her and, in Gregory Gulch, that was a rather remarkable feat.

Donald was less adept than Marianne at keeping the conversation about Sarah casual. He may have found a wonderful wife with whom he was deeply in love, but his opinion of Sarah Comstock's worth hadn't changed one iota.

"At the rate Sarah's moving, she could write about anything and the people around here wouldn't raise a disapproving eyebrow. She's getting quite a following behind her. First, there are those women with their quilting and charity groups. Then, there are those Cornish miners and their wives who would do anything for her after she shamed some of the mine owners into making improvements for their safety. Now, she's campaigning for a Widows' Fund."

"And she's a real favorite around the girls in most of the houses," added Marianne. "Take a guess why."

"I wouldn't dare," said Carlo.

"She's instituted a medical program for them," Marianne said. "You know how the doctors feel about treating them—the whole 'soiled dove' routine. After her articles on suicide and abortion came out, young Doctor Williams began calling on Sarah. Now she has him taking care of them regularly. Her attitude is that since the West is so lax about admitting prostitutes, they are here. And they have the right to be treated like people and given good medical care when needed.

"Dr. Williams is a fine person with the heart of a reformer hidden under all his medical knowledge."

"A knight in shining armor for Sarah, no doubt," remarked Carlo lightly, hoping to impress Marianne with his indifference.

Marianne smiled at him sweetly. "That's probably a most accurate description. As Sarah herself said to me just the other day, she couldn't wish to know a more handsome, intelligent and kind-hearted man."

Marianne bent over her needlework, hiding her face from view. Sarah never said any such thing but Carlo certainly had deserved that remark. When the brandy and cigars were finished, Carlo thanked them for the excellent meal and good company and politely excused himself.

As he neared his new apartment above the clothing store in Central City, he realized the last thing he wanted to do was go inside and work on the correspondence Hill had given him this afternoon. Without any clear thought in mind, he continued walking up the road to Nevadaville toward Ma Kittredge's. When he got to the door he shrugged; he might as well go in and have a drink. He might run into Dr. Williams.

A burly man answered the door and ushered Carlo into the plain parlor of the house, where Ma sat writing at a desk. She turned to greet him, but Carlo never heard her words.

Sarah Comstock, tears running down her cheeks, entered the room from a door on his left. Without looking up, she grabbed a cape from the couch near him and ran past the burly man and out the front door.

Ma opened her mouth to speak again but was interrupted by a handsome, harried-looking young man.

"Where'd she go, Ma?" he asked, pushing his straight blue-black hair from his face.

"Out the front door. What—?"

"We've lost Sally and the baby. I'm so sorry. I did my best but it wasn't good enough. We'll talk about it later. I've got to find Sarah."

Carlo may have been invisible for all the attention paid him during the past five minutes and for this he was thankful. Following Dr. Williams, Carlo walked slowly down the road to Central City and was brought up short by the sound of voices directly ahead in the darkness.

"Michael, I'm sorry I wasn't much help."

"You know I don't expect you to act like a trained midwife. I shouldn't have asked you to come with me. I blame myself."

"Please don't blame yourself. I started to think of my mother and—and I . . ."

To Carlo's surprise, he heard Sarah sobbing. Doc Williams spoke soothingly to her, warm and comforting endearments, and eventually the sobs subsided into little hiccups that made Sarah sound young and vulnerable and in need of protection.

"Thanks, Michael. You're always so good to me, so understanding."

"It comes with the diploma," he answered laughingly. "Let me get you home. I just happen to have a bottle of wine in my bag. I'm prescribing a glass or two with me before you retire for the night."

He heard their footsteps retreating in the distance and with a sigh, he continued walking. Why was it, he pondered, that each time he was around that woman, so much seemed to happen? Suicides, deaths in childbirth, angry scenes and letters. Did she spend her whole life wreaking havoc wherever she went?

He mentally squared his shoulders and spent the better part of the night penning a short note to Sarah, finally settling on the following. He sent it as soon as he was sure she would be at the *Clarion.*

Dearest Sarah,

As you may have known, I have returned to the area for an indefinite period of time. I would like to talk with you at your convenience, for I feel we have a number of matters to discuss.

Yours,
Carlo Ghiberti

I will pay the boy to remain and wait for your reply.

The delivery boy returned with Sarah's reply in less than an hour. Carlo picked up the note gingerly as if expecting it to explode in his hands. He turned it over several times before opening it.

Carlo,

I don't recall a single instance when you've held me in your dearest esteem, but I'm flattered nevertheless by that salutation. Yes, I do know you have returned since Donald and Marianne have managed to include your name in every conversation since your arrival two weeks ago. And knowing them, they've also given you some of the same treatment.

I'm glad you'll be in our tiny kingdom for an indefinite period of time. That's so convenient whenever you wish to extract yourself from an entangling situation—with Nathaniel Hill's support, of course.

I can picture your reaction now. "Why, that sharp-tongued shrew!" You may feel slighted by my response after you've so kindly extended a conciliatory hand. But, Carlo, if you hadn't seen me last night with Michael Williams, you would never have put pen to paper to contact me.

You do infuriate me, but I'm woman enough to admit that I would like to see you again, although we have a way of arguing rather than discussing issues between us. This time I promise not to run away before the discussion is ended.

With much trepidation,
Sarah Comstock

Carlo sat on the edge of the bed and reread her words, knowing full well she had again bettered him. His face finally broke into a delighted smile. Sarah's honesty and directness was a welcome relief after two weeks of avoiding her. For all her bluster, the tone was not unfriendly and although she was adept with words, she had forgotten to say when he could see her. He went to summon a messenger boy and then decided to visit the *Clarion* office personally.

Sarah was warned of Carlo's approach long before he reached the office door. Jack had noticed Carlo's figure from a distance and had muttered a distinctly unfriendly, "Lord! Nathaniel's minion is headed in this direction. I'm leaving," before departing through the rear door of the office.

Sarah hurriedly tried to pin back her hair and wipe the fresh ink off her hands, managing only to smear it from her hands to her dress and face. When Carlo entered through the front door, Sarah thought of following Jack's example. Anna, instead, gave her a push into the front room and she landed less than two feet away from Carlo's grinning face.

"Howdy," she said, giving him a lopsided little smile. "I forgot to mention that right now is not convenient." She waved her stained hands in front of her and blushed. "I was so busy being clever, I never did answer that part of your note."

"Could that be Sarah Comstock behind an inked face, eating humble pie? I've got to sit down, for she's shocked me one more time." With that, Carlo slumped into the nearest chair.

"Carlo, stop being silly and get up. I'm up to my neck in work so I can't talk with you right now. And for once, will you stop making me into something I'm not."

Carlo raised his eyes to the ceiling and groaned. "Here we go again. We've barely exchanged civilities and we're fighting."

"Discussing," corrected Sarah, her dark eyes flashing.

"You know, you're beautiful when you look like that," Carlo said, backing toward the front door. "Even if you're too tall, too thin, and too outspoken. But I don't mind being seen with you in public, so I'll meet you here at seven to take you to dinner. Only get that ink off your nose before I arrive."

He tipped his hat in her direction and closed the door behind him.

With Anna's help, Sarah did manage to finish her work on the press, make the fifteen minute walk to Glory Hole, change, and return by the appointed time. Sarah tried hard to hide her rising nervousness, but she ended up fussing with everything from the buckles on her shoes to the pleated bodice of her beige and white dress before Carlo arrived.

"I extend an offering of peace," announced Carlo upon entering the office promptly at seven. He held out a small package in his hand. "Will you accept?"

Sarah flushed and eyed him warily. "Albert Claxon always said to avoid those who bear gifts for no apparent reason."

"And I've always been told not to look a gift horse in the mouth."

Sarah reached out and took the package from Carlo's hand. "Shall I open it now?"

Carlo nodded and then watched as Sarah ripped the paper off the package and opened it with all the enthusiasm and artlessness of a ten-year-old child.

She smiled with obvious pleasure as she examined the gift, a delicate figure of a mountain goat attached to a slim chain.

"I should have known you'd think of something like this. If I were truly proper, I'd be obliged to return this to you. But I have no intention of doing that."

"I counted on just that response," replied Carlo, pleased that she liked his choice. "You recognize it then?"

"Oh, yes."

"I should warn you. My simple gift is laden with much more symbolism than first meets the eye."

Sarah took the necklace out of the box and looked at it thoughtfully. "It's obvious that the goat symbolizes my birth sign, Capricorn. How you knew that poses the first puzzle."

"Not with someone like Albert Claxton around. That man's a veritable fountain of information, trivial and wise."

They both laughed. "Okay, next. The goat could stand for a few traits you see in me," said Sarah, trying to hide her grin. "Things like stubborn, determined, restless, never satisfied. Am I close?"

She looked at Carlo and he gave her an enigmatic smile before answering. "Remember, this is to be a peace offering. If I answer that, I don't think it will have served its purpose very well. But the necklace is truly a peace offering. If you happen to have some of the mountain goat's bad traits as well as good, so be it. And may I add, before you hit me with that book you're fingering, that I think you look stunning tonight, although I miss the inky nose."

"You know, when you're through talking, I'm never sure if I've been complimented or not."

"Good. I rather like keeping you guessing."

Sarah walked over to Carlo and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "That works two ways. Where shall we go to eat?"

Their dinner conversation reminded Sarah of the intricate contradance steps she had learned with Heather Norton in the church hall in Fairview years ago. She and Carlo advanced and retreated, moved in unison, and parted sharply, only to return again and again to a harmonious position.

If asked, Carlo would probably have compared their talking with something less pleasurable than dancing, perhaps a dueling match, for he felt they were constantly thrusting and parrying, swiftly countering the other's every move. Why he should feel so happy matching wits with Sarah continued to mystify him, but she gave him little time to consider it.

When dinner was over she led him to the social hall of the Brothers of Cornwall. "Whatever are we here for?" he asked, making a mental bet with himself that it had to do with the Widows' Fund or some new cause she had dreamt up this afternoon.

"Didn't you see the posters all over town? A good, old-fashioned dance with fiddles and reels and—" Seeing Carlo's face, she stopped talking.

"Go on," he said politely.

"How can I, with you looking like that? What's the matter?"

"Nothing, just my usual dazed expression when I'm around you. Did you actually say dance? I was preparing myself for a protest meeting."

"Are you mounting a counteroffensive because you can't dance?"

"Since when did nice little Quaker girls learn to use such big military words?"

"I'm not little. I'm not a Quaker. And I'm not a girl."

"But I can dance, so let's go."

If Carlo hadn't thought Sarah capable of deviousness, he was accusing her of just that by the time the dance was over at midnight. Once there, she was claimed by one group after another and during the breaks between sets, she was surrounded by men and women. When Doc Williams walked in about ten-thirty, as though by prearrangement, the other men left Sarah alone long enough to be claimed by the good doctor for almost every set.

As the fiddler was closing his case after the last dance, Carlo made his way through the crowd to Sarah and stood quietly while she and Michael talked about the Hennessey baby and the new fever outbreak. Finally, Carlo thrust his hand out and introduced himself to Williams.

"Oh, so you're the mysterious man in the night," said Michael amiably. "Sarah's like a cat in the dark. She sees and hears things most people would never notice. Hope we didn't embarrass you with that scene."

"I was worried that perhaps I had embarrassed you," Carlo replied just as amiably. "Sarah, may I walk you home now?"

"Oh, don't bother," said Doc. "I'm heading out her way. It'll be no trouble."

Carlo was sure Williams wouldn't find it the least bit inconvenient to walk Sarah home, but he kept his thoughts to himself and looked to Sarah for her response.

"Thanks, Michael, but Carlo and I have some more catching-up to do before I head home. I'll see you tomorrow. You promised you'd go with me to see Ben Waterman about the Widows' Fund."

"I haven't forgotten. I'll meet you at

his office at ten sharp," Williams said, leaving.

"Seems every time I'm around you, Sarah, I find you've made yet another man into your adoring servant."

"That's flattering and untrue," she replied as they went out into the cool night air. "The thought of a man being an adoring servant is abhorrent."

"You're using your most formal manner with me again, Sarah. I'm just stating what I see."

"Then I'd suggest you correct your eyesight."

Carlo bit back the retort on the lip of his tongue. Instead he asked, "Why the dance tonight? If you meant to make me jealous, you succeeded admirably. There, I've said it. I'm jealous of every lousy Cousin Jack, doctor and lawyer that danced with you tonight. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Sarah grabbed his arm and looked at him steadily. "No, I meant nothing of the kind. Perhaps you're used to flirtatious women and being deceived. I've no use for that sort of thing. Every Thursday evening I go to the hall for whatever kind of evening they have planned. They're my friends. I care about them. They care about me. Living alone can be nice but it does get lonely, Carlo. I fill that loneliness in the only way I know—by being with people that I like and that like to be with me."

Sarah's lip trembled and Carlo, hearing her words, felt ashamed of his outburst. He took her hand in his and lifted it to his cheek.

"I guess I've a lot to learn about you. You don't give me many chances to do that though."

"You make it hard, too. Every time we've said something important you disappear."

"I've had good, sound business reasons to do so," Carlo said stiffly. "Furthermore, when a woman lectures me that I am wrong in the way I act, think, and feel, then I say that woman's way out of line, no matter how beautiful she looks or how much her spirited nature obscures my good judgment."

Sarah withdrew her hand. "I haven't said you were wrong. Perhaps you should check with me first before you tell me what my feelings are."

"What are your feelings?" Harshness and caring were mingled in those four words.

"Right now?"

Carlo stepped closer. "Yes."

"What do you expect me to say? That I fell madly in love with you when I first saw you standing in the firelight of the festival? That I haven't married because I've been waiting for you to propose? That I can't get you out of my thoughts and dreams?"

Sarah's smile was neither mocking nor serious. It held only longing and wistfulness. "No, Carlo. I've not felt those things for you. The Ute Indians have a legend about people like us. Our spirits are full of trouble and turmoil and when we're placed together, there's a great capacity to love or hate. We circle each other carefully, afraid to ignite the spark that could be destructive or fulfilling. Neither of us wants to take the chance of ruining our perfectly adequate lives. The story goes that two such people will stay locked together in their futile dance until they mutually agree to destroy the tie binding them."

"I understand," he spoke softly. "I won't make it any more difficult for either of us. Good-bye, Sarah."

Carlo disappeared into the blackness of the night and Sarah, wrapping her cape tightly around her, followed the path to the Glory Hole, oblivious to the majesty of the stars overhead and the tears coursing down her face.

Shortly before ten Sarah left the *Clarion* for Ben Waterman's office next to the new bank. When she came closer, she was surprised by the dark shadows under Michael Williams's eyes and a tightness around his mouth.

"How much sleep did you get last night?" Sarah asked as soon as she reached his side.

"I was going to ask you the same question. You look dreadful."

"I feel it, too. You didn't answer me, Michael. Were you up late with patients?"

"You're worse than a surrogate mother. No, I was in an all-night poker game down at the Shoo Fly in Black Hawk."

She flashed him a quick smile before beginning the interview with Waterman. Michael Williams remained silent throughout most of the meeting, offering information only when asked directly. He marveled at how quickly Sarah had wrapped this old curmudgeon around her fingers without using typical feminine wiles. As Sarah and Waterman were coming to agreement on a generous figure of ten dollars per month, Michael's attention was diverted from the scene in the office to the bustle outside the front door. He caught his breath as he heard the dreaded screams of fire and saw men, women, and children running wildly in all directions.

Waterman was the first to reach the door and the three looked with amazement on the chaos in the street. Up and down the narrow gulch, people were yelling frantically and pointing toward the Chinese quarters where black smoke could be seen pouring from one of the laundries. Spires of flames were shooting into the light morning sky, already beginning to lick at wooden shanties and sidewalks, falsefronted stores, and outbuildings with a speed that was frightening to watch. Central City was being destroyed in a matter of minutes. Sarah heard her name being called from a long distance and then felt Michael's hands on her shoulders, shaking her.

"Are you all right?" he asked, concern on his face.

She nodded.

"Okay. I want you to go down to the gulch. Get out of the path of this fire and warn everyone on the way. There's nothing you can do here."

"Where you are going?"

"To make sure everyone is out of the Chinese section. You know no one else will go in there except their own kind. They'll need help."

"I'm going with you."

"For once in your life, will you recognize that you can't do certain things? Get out of here. I don't want to have to worry about you."

Sarah stood in front of Michael, her hands on her hips. "There's no time for arguing. Where you go, I go. That's it."

Michael shrugged his shoulders, turned, and began running toward Main Street and Chinamen's Alley with Sarah close behind. Acrid smoke and sizzling embers filled the air as they approached the fire. Bucket brigades and fire hoses were being set up, but Sarah knew the futility of their job. Cisterns were almost dry, and the creek couldn't give water it didn't have.

Sarah heard men yelling orders to alert the working miners and to telegraph nearby Golden for help. Others were occupied with leading terrified horses to safety. Chinese with red-rimmed eyes stumbled down the street, clutching their meager belongings and dragging children and older people behind them.

Sarah's eyes stung and her throat began to ache, but she continued to follow Michael determinedly until she

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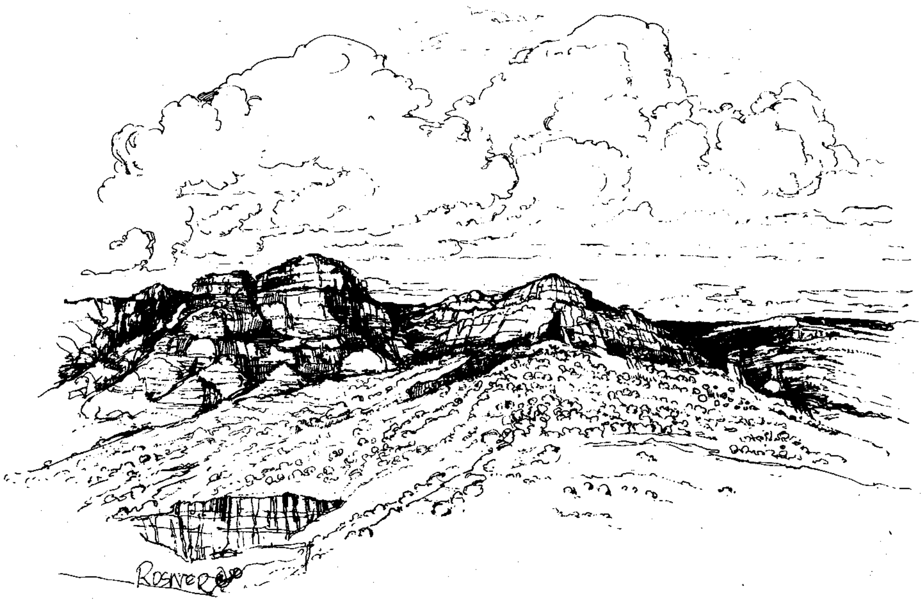
And when love speaks, the voice of all the gods
Makes heaven drowsy with the harmony.

William Shakespeare
Love's Labor's Lost



saw a little boy separated from his family. She took his hand and plodded on. Michael appeared around the corner of a house and threw a squalling baby into her arms. He pointed to a young woman coughing violently in the middle of the street. Sarah ran to her while Michael grabbed the hand of an old woman sitting serenely in the midst of the confusion, a dazed look on her face. Together they made their way back down Main and out to Eureka Street.

Sarah tried to walk rapidly, shifting the weight of the baby from one side to the other, while protecting her noisy little charge from the rough jostling of the crowds. Nearing the *Clarion* office, she recognized Jack piling paper rolls and ink cartons into a buckboard as Anna held the horse so it wouldn't bolt. A phalanx of brawny miners marched up the street, picks and axes in hand, dynamite strapped to their belts.

Throwing the baby into Anna's arms, Sarah ran after the miners, catching up with them when they stopped four blocks past the Teller House. The smoke had grown so thick that Sarah now had difficulty seeing what the men were trying to do. Hoses were placed in wells, pumping until they quickly went dry. Some miners began to swing their axes, cutting down frame buildings in the path of the flames; others were busy setting charges to dynamite the larger structures in the way.

The ground shook ominously after each charge was ignited. Buildings would stand poised frighteningly for a fraction of a second before collapsing with an impact that made Sarah shudder. Ignoring occasional hostile looks, Sarah joined the men clearing each building. They worked at a frantic pace, kicking in doors, running through rooms, and searching behind each store and shanty before giving the go-ahead to use axes or dynamite.

Once during the next two hours, Sarah saw Michael waving his fist at her and screaming words she couldn't hear above the roar of the fire and collapsing wood timbers. Otherwise no one tired to stop her until she ran from the back of a grocery store cradling a mangy dog in her arms and bumped headlong into Carlo. His face was covered with grime, his shirt torn. He ran his fingers through his hair and stared at her for a full moment before taking her arm and dragging her out the door.

"You damn fool. Get the hell out of here before you get yourself hurt. You'd be stupid enough to lose your life trying to save a rotten dog." His dark eyes were burning with a strange inner light. "Go, Sarah. Now."

She shook her head. "I can take care of myself. I won't do anything foolish." She started walking down the road with as much dignity as she could muster.

When Sarah reached the *Clarion* office with the dog, Jack grabbed her arm impatiently. "They need every man, woman, and child at the Teller House. That's where we sent that crew you brought down from Chinatown. Since the hotel's made of bricks, they're going to make a last stand there. Everyone's needed in the bucket brigade to soak the walls."

Sarah obediently took her place in the brigade line and, battling her exhaustion, passed endless buckets of water until the cisterns of all the adjacent buildings were emptied. She spotted a man with Carlo's build carrying clothes and books down an outside staircase above the clothing store. Sarah walked slowly in that direction, her muscles moving reluctantly. Without speaking, she approached Carlo and took the heavy load from his arms and marched back down the street to the *Clarion*, passing horses and people without taking notice of them.

Sarah dropped his personal belongings wearily on the floor of the office and returned to the clothing store in search of Carlo. On not finding him outside, she climbed the staircase and entered the hall leading to the rooms above the main store.

Carlo had been standing across the street talking with the dynamiters who had wired the store to remove it from the path of the oncoming fire. He suddenly came to full attention as he saw Sarah climb the stairs and disappear into the targeted building. With rising panic, he screamed her name, but the noise and confusion around him drowned the sound of his voice. Oblivious to the cries of the miners and to his own danger, Carlo bolted across the street and up the stairway.

Sarah continued to go from room to room, her tired mind finding nothing unusual about the fact that the entire second floor was now empty of people and furnishings. Slowly she headed back up the hallway to the door, trying to shake off her exhaustion. She thought she heard shouting outside mixed with the sound of timbers being chopped. She felt the unmistakable heat of flames flickering nearby and as the building began to shake, she broke into a run for the stairs and almost screamed when two arms encircled her. Silently Carlo swung her off her feet and carried her downstairs. Only when he deposited her twenty yards away from the building did he make an attempt to speak.

"You might look skinny but you weigh close to a ton," he muttered, wiping the sweat off his forehead. Suddenly the clothing store exploded and burst into flames, and Sarah swayed slightly.

"You're not going to do something feminine and faint on me?" Carlo kept his voice purposely nonchalant.

Sarah smiled weakly. "No, I'm not very good at that. Thank you, Carlo. You saved my life."

"Look, do me a favor in return. Go down to Black Hawk and stay with the Rumsticks until the fire is over. I'm only good for one act of heroism per day."

She touched his face gently. "I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything. Just get yourself away from here."

"Will we have a chance to talk again?"

"You're the most exasperating woman I've ever met. You're in the midst of a fire and your biggest worry is whether we'll talk again."

"I don't find that strange."

"You wouldn't," said Carlo, his patience stretched to the limit. "I promise you, Sarah Comstock, we'll talk. Now, for God's sake, please go."

He leaned over and brushed back a strand of hair and kissed her, his mouth full on hers. He then put his hands on her shoulders, spun her around, and pushed her off in the direction of Black Hawk. With a meekness that astounded him, Sarah continued walking.

Six hours after it began, the fire was brought under control. Not until the wee hours of the morning did the last smoking ember die out, leaving the heart of Gregory Gulch a blackened waste, dotted with giant chimneys of brick and stone. Much of Black Hawk, including the Rumsticks apartment, had not been touched. The *Clarion* office went similarly unscathed. Jack and Anna lost their house off Eureka Street, but they only shrugged and set up makeshift living quarters in the back of the office. The press was saved and that was all that mattered to them in terms of worldly possessions.

Early the next morning, Jack sat satisfied with himself and his world. They'd have a special edition out on the streets within twenty-four hours of the fire, which was more than could be said for either the *Register* or the *Town Talk*, since both had suffered heavy losses.

Sarah, still tired but better rested than many of the townspeople, took Jack to task for this callous attitude toward his competitors.

"I think the least you can do is let them use our press until they can repair theirs," she declared angrily. "You can charge them for paper and ink if it would make you feel better. You ought to march right down there now and make an offer to them both." Anna, standing directly behind him, nodded in vigorous assent.

"Confounded, soft-hearted women," muttered Jack as he shuffled out the door. "Hen-pecked in my own office."

When he was out of sight, Anna leaned over and confided in Sarah. "He's been wanting to offer them the press but hated to look too nice. He puts up a good act."

"Great," mumbled Sarah on her way out the door.

"Where you going?"

"To Glory Hole. I've been in the same clothes for twenty-four hours now. I need a bath, clean clothes and some sleep."

"She did what?" asked Albert Claxton. His eyes danced with delight.

"Sarah singlehandedly stopped a mob from turning on the Chinese after the fire. She promised them all free copies of my paper, to boot. Then she fainted dead away," repeated Jack Langhorne, slapping his knee. He leaned back in his chair in the *Clarion* office and scrutinized his two visitors.

"Did you hear that, Nina? Did you?" Albert was fairly jumping with excitement.

"Yes, I heard. I only wish that Sarah were here," replied Nina with a weary smile. She directed her next comment to Jack. "I don't understand why Sarah went to Denver with the Rumsticks. I don't mean to be impolite but I'm having difficulty following your story."

"No problem, ma'am," answered Jack agreeably. "Anna's always saying I never get to the point. Well, Sarah stopped the mob the day after the fire, but the problems with the Chinese didn't stop. The fire was caused by a defective flue in one of their hand laundries. Sarah did as promised and wrote it up proper. That day we had to give away almost five thousand copies. Mind you, that was five thousand *free* copies."

Nina nodded encouragingly. At last this infuriating man was beginning to make sense.

"A group of Irishmen—you know how they're always fighting and feuding—well, they got themselves lickered up and decided to teach the Chinese a lesson for not keeping their chimneys in good order like decent folk. So they went out to Chinamen's Alley with their knives and scissors and cut off every pigtail in sight.

"When Sarah heard that, she wrote a blistering article about treating Chinese like real people, demanding that apologies be made, that kind of thing. You don't have to come from Gregory Gulch to know what happened next. Everybody was riled up, but she refused to swallow her words. The Rumsticks and Doc Williams practically carried her off to Denver until things cool down here. She just doesn't know when to stop."

"Why did a doctor go with them? Was Sarah sick?"

"Healthy as a horse, from all I've seen. She's never sick. Nope, the Doc's a friend." Jack gave a long, low chuckle. "Probably would like to be more, but Sarah's blind to some things when she has a mind to be."

"Do you have any idea when she'll be back?" asked Albert. "I'd just as soon forego that train ride down to Denver. Coming here was thrill enough for me at my age."

"Things pass quickly in this town. Everyone's up to his ears in rebuilding about now. Sarah will be back soon," Jack declared. "Why not wait here and watch the rebuilding going on? Get yourself some rooms at the Teller or go on out to Sarah's place at Glory Hole."

"Glory Hole?" Nina looked perplexed and Albert burst out laughing.

"Up near the summit of Quartz Hill there's not much left but a crater called the Glory Hole. Tons of gold have been taken out of there over the years. Out here, we're not too formal. Sarah lives in that general direction, so that's the name of her place, too."

"Do you know if a Mr. Carlo Ghiberti is in Gregory Gulch now?" Albert saw Langhorne's pleasant expression become guarded with the change in subject.

"Last I knew, he was. Sarah said something about his saving her life during the fire. Why she bothers with that man—life-saver or not—is beyond me." Jack's face brightened considerably, an insight flashing through his mind. "Maybe it's like her thing with the Chinese and prostitutes. She's always trying to help, no matter how worthless."

Nina winced.

"Mr. Langhorne," Albert said sternly, "Carlo Ghiberti happens to be a very good friend of mine. In fact, I consider him to be a fine person and I'd be proud to call him son as well as friend. I'm sure he has his share of human frailties. I'm also certain that he has done nothing to deserve your low opinion. As for the Chinese and prostitutes, I find Sarah's outlook refreshing."

"My apologies, friend. No offense meant. Ghiberti just rubs me the wrong way," mumbled Jack, turning to the work on his desk. "He can be found at Hill's smelter. Can't miss it. Right near the train station in Black Hawk. It's the place fouling the air around here."

"Thank you for your help," Nina said as she steered Albert out the front door.

When they were on the street, she gave her husband an amused look. "Now, where to?"

"I'd reckon we'd best find that worthless Carlo."

Finding Carlo proved to be more difficult than first imagined. He wasn't in his office at the smelter nor was he anywhere else on the premises. Finally, one of Hill's assistants located him in the midst of a meeting at Hill's house. Rather than disturb Carlo, they left a

* * *

To love is to believe, to hope, to know;
'Tis an essay, a taste of Heaven below!

Edmund Waller
Divine Love

message with the assistant and returned to Central City to their rooms at the Teller House.

To their delight, Carlo was waiting for them as they came down from their rooms for dinner that evening.

Neither the Claxtons nor Carlo were aware of their meal as they caught up on everything that had happened during the past year. Albert probed subtly, trying to uncover the state of Sarah's and Carlo's friendship but had little success until Nina said casually, "Your life has remained virtually unchanged."

"I'm in the midst of completing plans for a drastic change. Albert, please take that hopeful look off your face. It has nothing to do with Sarah Comstock. I spent the afternoon going over details of a summer expedition with Dr. Ferdinand Hayden. Does that mean anything to you?"

Both shook their heads.

"He's been mapping the Yellowstone area in the Wyoming Territory and was just named Geologist-In-Charge of surveying the territories for the Department of the Interior. His newest assignment is nothing less than mapping the Colorado Rockies."

"I know your background is strong in metallurgy and engineering but I'd think mapping would be rather over your head," Albert said.

"Definitely. After listening to Hayden though, I'd work for him in any capacity. It would be a terrific education. He sees these mountains in a way I've never heard them described before. After being around him, I've found his enthusiasm contagious. Much to my surprise, less than four hours ago, Hayden agreed to let me join the expedition. And I even have Hill's blessing."

Carlo leaned back in his chair, a boyish grin lighting his face.

"When will you be leaving?"

"I'll be gone by the end of this week."

"Carlo, I can understand what an opportunity this is for you," Nina said quietly. "I'm curious whether Sarah knows anything about your plans. I have a suspicion that she has something to do with this, too. Am I right?"

Carlo looked down at his plate, his expression hidden from her scrutiny. "She knows nothing about the Hayden expedition. Hopefully, I'll be gone before she returns."

He turned an anguished face to the older woman. "Believe me, it's best this way. Sarah must understand that. I promised her the day of the fire we would see one another again. For the first time in my life, I'm deliberately breaking a promise. I have to leave. Not for her, for me. Will you please try to explain this to her."

An uncomfortable silence settled on them as Nina folded and unfolded her dinner napkin. "I don't know what has happened between you and Sarah this past year. However, I will do as you have requested. I'll tell her you are leaving." She paused uncertainly before adding, "For your own sake, I hope you find what you're searching for."

"Or turn around and face what you're running *from*," Albert said.

Carlo looked from husband to wife and gave a resigned shrug of his shoulders. "From the way you two are glaring at me, you obviously are aware of my feelings for Sarah. I've been in love with her for a long time, although I've just begun to admit that to myself."

"So what's the problem? Why the gallavanting all over the country? You go to Nevada. She takes off for Denver. Now you're going into the wilds with Hayden. Why?" Albert was genuinely puzzled.

"Simple. Even if she woke up and realized she feels the same way, we still couldn't marry."

"Why not?" asked Nina, exasperated.

"We'd be at each other's throats within a year. We're different. I have no intention of changing, and Sarah's not exactly the compromising type, either. As the poets say, I'd rather love her purely from afar than risk the destruction of that love from daily contact."

"You make a lousy poet," Albert commented disgustedly. "Life is full of compromises, changes, give and take. If you don't recognize that fact by now, I give up trying to get it into your head."

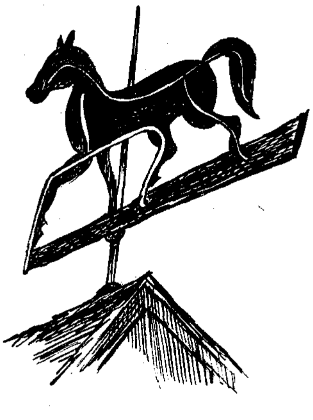
Carlo looked stonily at the two people seated across the table from him. "I'm not seeking your advice. I've made up my mind."

"I know," Nina answered quietly. "But we have a way of interfering in other people's lives. One last question before I keep my silence on this subject forever. Sarah's not going to reject every man who's interested in her. One day she'll become lonely and return the interest. Doesn't that bother you in light of your declaration of love?"

"Yes, but it's part of the price I'll have to pay. I don't want to be rude," Carlo said coldly, "and I respect you both, but it's my life we're discussing and I've chosen to live it as I see fit. I'm leaving within the week, no matter how you label my intentions."

The three stood and left the dining room in strained silence. They parted at the entrance of the hotel, and the Claxtons retired to their rooms for the night.

"People can be infuriating," Albert said softly to his wife. "Most infuriating."



The Claxtons' visit didn't improve upon Sarah's return three days later. After the initial flurry of hugs and kisses at the Teller House, Nina and Albert took a long look at Sarah and were distressed at what they saw. She seemed tired and dispirited, the dark circles under her eyes reminding them of those terrible days following Phebe's death. Donald and Marianne were similarly subdued, and a scruffy Doctor Williams hastily excused himself after introductions were made.

"All right," exclaimed Albert. "What's hit you three? We don't want a fuss made over us, but you don't have to restrain yourself to this extent. First, we have a run-in with Crusader Jack. Then, Carlo Ghiberti tells us politely where we can go. Now, you arrive with long faces and act like you've lost your best friend."

"I think I did," said Donald somberly.

"Doesn't anybody in Colorado speak in a simple, direct fashion?" Nina yelled at him. "What in heaven's name do you mean by that?"

"When we got off the train, Carlo was checking out supplies on the platform. He was with a strange little man—a real seedy-looking fellow wearing a frayed frock coat and an equally disreputable hat. This guy was storming around the station in a rage, although Carlo didn't seem to take much notice."

"The man's name is Hayden," interrupted Sarah. "He's a geographer leading a government expedition that's leaving from here tomorrow."

"I know," Nina and Albert sighed in unison.

Donald took a deep breath and

looked in Sarah's direction. "Carlo and Sarah started talking pleasantly and suddenly they were screaming at each other. You've never seen such a fight! Well, Marianne soon got into the fray, too. She seemed to know what it was all about, which is more than I do, even now. When Carlo started yelling at Marianne, the next thing I knew I found myself defending these two and telling Carlo to go to his blasted mountains and be damned." Donald wore a look of utter dejection.

"That's not all," Marianne continued agitatedly. "Michael Williams was collecting our baggage and missed most of it. When he did appear, he saw Carlo move toward Sarah. I'm not sure what he thought, but he ran over and hit Carlo."

"It was all so stupid," cried Sarah. "Carlo and I acted very childish, but Michael was even worse. He and Carlo started brawling with a station full of people watching. They said terrible things to one another. When Carlo knocked Michael down, I thought he was hurt badly and ran over to him. This seemed to infuriate Carlo more than anything else, and he walked away without a backward glance. You know, I never realized he had a temper."

"There's a lot more to that man than he's ever willing to show," Donald commented quietly. "If I know him the way I think I do, we won't be seeing him for months to come. When he does show up, he'll be calm and completely in control. He'll make a contrite apology and all will be forgiven. Carlo's charming, maddening, and beyond my comprehension."

"Well-said, darling," remarked Marianne as she pulled him to his feet and tugged at his arm. "It's time for us to leave." She looked at the Claxtons. "I can't wait to visit with you properly, but you need time to talk with Sarah first. Please come to dinner tonight."

She gave Sarah a kiss on the cheek. "Cheer up. At least you foiled Carlo's attempt to sneak off without seeing you. Personally, I thought it rather exciting."

Donald took his wife's arm protectively and they walked out the door.

"That's some wife he's found himself," Albert said, his admiration for Marianne obvious.

"She's some friend, too," Sarah added. "Now, Nina, let me take a good look at you. Lord, how I've missed you both."

Within minutes they were talking so rapidly that Albert gave up trying to compete with them. Instead, he sat back and smiled with satisfaction. Being with Sarah again had already breathed new life into his weary heart and bones. When Nina reached the point in her recital of their meeting with Carlo, Albert watched Sarah's reaction closely. Nina repeated most of their dinner conversation while Sarah listened with a guarded expression which told Albert much.

"You two didn't mince words with him," she observed when Nina finished. "I knew he'd go away again as soon as he could manage it. He just happened to beat me at my own game, though. I was going to leave since Central City is too small for both of us to exist here comfortably. I'm joining a botany group who'll be studying the Gilpin County plant life this summer. The leaders are friends of Michael Williams from Yale University."

Sarah looked at them apologetically. "I didn't realize you'd be arriving this early in the summer."

She watched with surprise as Nina and Albert exchanged glances and began laughing. Albert caught his breath long enough to say, "This whole deuced territory and everybody in it has gone mad."

"What's mad about scientific exploration?" Sarah asked innocently.

"Nothing" Albert waved his hand. "What's wrong is the casual way everybody just ups and leaves on these fantastic trips as if they were doing the most ordinary thing in the world."

"There's a nothing-is-impossible attitude toward most things around here," Sarah retaliated. "Including traipsing around looking at wildflowers for the summer with a group of Yale professors. Marianne's willing to take my place at the *Clarion* until September."

Suddenly Sarah's face darkened.

THE CHAMPION

by Laurence E. Estes

She will not bow to beauty
Nor live alone for power—
She is more to life than duty
And she will have her hour.

Yes, she will have her hour
When beauty dies and goes,
When greed has lost its power
Like the wilting of a rose.

Love is always champion
No matter who her foes—
Remember she has always won
The battle as she goes.

"Now that you're here, I think I should reconsider."

"No, you won't. I'd hate to spoil this new-found adventuresome spirit of yours. Nina and I have been talking about visiting a few of the towns near train routes while the weather is good. We'll time our trips with your group's activities and use Central City as a base."

Sarah looked dubious but soon Jack Langhorne, as well as the Claxtons, had convinced her to leave. Because of Michael Williams, Sarah was first received into this august company with a pleasant sort of formality. Within a short time, she was being warmly accepted for her own contributions to the group's comfort and welfare.

She returned to Central City less frequently as the summer progressed, and Michael Williams took to riding out to visit with his friends, and usually managed to find an hour or two with Sarah alone. She and Michael had always shared an easy camaraderie, and his visits to the camp strengthened it.

Being with Michael became more confusing for Sarah with each visit, however. When he deliberately brushed against her or leaned his face near hers, she'd find herself wanting to respond, liking the warm sensations that came with being close to him. But she was always the first to move away, put off by something in his manner she couldn't define.

Sarah began to spend more of her free time hiking alone through forests that were growing more familiar to her. And as the weeks passed, Carlo, rather than Michael, crept more and more into her thoughts. During her solitary treks, anger and fear and hurt faded slowly. Confusion over her feelings toward Carlo gave way to clarity and a quiet acknowledgement of her unrest. In the next packet of outgoing mail, Sarah wrote only ten words to Carlo: *"I need to see you again. I love you. Sarah."*

Two weeks later, Sarah's letter arrived at the Hayden expedition's camp near Lawson. When Carlo spied Sarah's letter, he was reluctant to open it. He abruptly left the company of the others to read her message in private, his face flushed with the thought of their last stormy encounter at the railroad station.

Each time Carlo read her words, he could feel exhilaration and anxiety coursing through him. He knew he had no choice except to face the challenge that Sarah represented, one which he knew he had avoided far too long. He answered her note immediately using the same frugality of words: "When I arrive on the 14th of September, we will talk. Love, Carlo."

On that fourteenth day in September, as promised, Carlo arrived in Gregory Gulch on the Colorado Central and walked the distance from Black Hawk to the Teller House unrecognized. In his room, he trimmed his beard and ragged hair. His stylish three-piece business suit now looked alien, so he slipped into a muslin shirt and casual pants. With a soft doeskin jacket slung over his shoulder, Carlo left the hotel and took the road to Nevadaville, leaving it when he reached the footpath that led to Glory Hole.

He approached a neat, white-washed cabin as darkness fell and knew, without asking, that Sarah lived there. Who else in this godforsaken wasteland would bother to paint their house or put live plants in the front windows?

He knocked on the door but there was no answer. The latch wasn't secured, so he opened the door and surveyed the neat interior. He smiled as he walked through Sarah's home.

His smile faded as he heard footsteps outside the cabin. He turned to greet Sarah and stopped when he saw her standing in the doorway, her face tanned and flushed and her hair windblown. He took one look at the bloomers on her legs and laughed aloud.

"We've come full circle."

"Only this pair fits better," she replied with a clear, rippling laugh of delight that broke the tension between them. "Dresses are impractical, and here in Glory Hole, there's no one to notice what I wear."

"Not even the good doctor?" Carlo asked.

"Oh, he and just about everyone with the expedition this summer saw my bloomers," she answered nonchalantly.

"Expedition?"

"You're not the only one capable of exploring the countryside, although my trips were more modest in scope. I want to hear about your summer, but I'm famished and need to eat first. Have you had dinner?"

Carlo shook his head and watched Sarah closely, sensing the change in her. There was a softness present, a warm peaceful quality.

They talked casually of the summer, neither feeling the need to rush into lengthy explanations. While she prepared a meal for them, Carlo brought in wood for the stove and fireplace, and made coffee with a domestic familiarity which surprised her. Vegetables and cheese along with freshly baked bread made up their dinner yet neither really noticed or cared what they were eating.

They cleaned the dishes together and quietly moved to sit by the fire Carlo had started. Rocking slowly in their separate chairs, they watched the firelight flickering on the walls and floors, each loathe to break the comfortable silence surrounding them.

Finally, Sarah spoke in a small voice. "At first, I didn't want you ever to come back here. Later, I grew afraid that you would stay away. It's good to see you again."

"I'll be honest with you, Sarah. I meant to stay away for good. I was tired of the hurt and confusion we cause one another, but then something happened this summer. At first, it didn't seem to be connected with you. After your letter arrived, I knew I had changed and that it affected us."

"I think I know what you're talking about, Carlo, although I don't pretend to understand it."

"You once mentioned a Ute legend about a futile dance between two souls locked together. I've thought a lot about that lately. And about freedom, too."

He paused and looked uncertain. Sarah leaned over and put her fingers to his lips.

"Don't talk now, if you can't find the words. We don't have to rush into needless explanations to fill the space between us."

"You don't seem to realize what I'm trying to say. We still have that awful capacity to hurt one another and it frightens me. It's like the mountains I was with all summer. I love them with an intensity I can almost reach out and touch. But there's real danger in loving like that. When I love something I want to cherish and protect and nurture it . . ."

Carlo stared into the fire, not daring to look at Sarah. She arose from the rocking chair and stood in front of him, her expression unreadable in the shadows. Carlo stood up and put his arms around her and guided her gently to the couch in front of the fireplace. He sat down, pulling her into his lap. Then he pushed her away from him to look fully into her face. He had never seen her look more beautiful.

They began then to talk of many thing and as they did, Sarah realized that Carlo was restraining himself with an iron will. She sat huddled in his arms and as he spoke, he touched her hair and her face and her lips. Time seemed lost to them both as their immersion in each other became complete. Finally, they fell asleep, their arms wound tight around each other.

Early morning sunlight flooded through the window. Sarah opened her eyes briefly, then shut them quickly and snuggled down further into Carlo's lap. He had not stirred. Sarah thought she heard a horse neighing nearby but dismissed the idea quickly. She had few close neighbors, and the few people living in Glory Hole either walked or had dependable mules. The horse neighed again and Carlo woke up with a start. Sarah blinked her eyes, and both she and Carlo got to their feet at the same moment Michael Williams opened the door.

He stood quietly in the entrance, surveying Carlo and Sarah with the same perplexed look. Sarah was tempted to laugh but restrained herself.

"Why, you're up early this morning," she managed to say without a giggle.

Michael's features relaxed slightly. Sarah's casualness was reassuring, and he wondered whether he had judged the situation too hastily. Sarah might be independent and headstrong, but she was also a very moral woman.

"I wouldn't have disturbed you at this hour unless it was important," Michael answered with obvious difficulty. "I spent most of the night with Jack Langhorne. I'm sorry to say he passed on about an hour ago. The Claxtons are with Anna. She's holding up fine. I hated the thought of your going into the office and finding out there."

"That's ridiculous. Jack's in perfect health," Sarah protested. "What are you talking about?"

"Jack was working late last night. When I came back from the Colfaxes, I saw the light burning and decided to go in and talk for a while. I found him slumped over the desk, clutching his shirt front. To put it simply, his heart gave out. He died a few hours later without regaining consciousness. I'm sorry, Sarah."

Sarah walked over to the rocking chair and sat staring into the empty fireplace, her throat constricted.

"Would you like me to take you into

town? I brought the buggy." Michael continued to ignore Carlo.

"No. I'd like to have some time to myself first, thanks."

Carlo quietly approached Michael. "Thanks for being so thoughtful," he said smoothly. "Let me accompany you down the path a short way. I think Sarah might appreciate being left by herself."

With that, Carlo slung his jacket over his shoulder and beckoned a reluctant Michael to follow him. Once outside and no more than a few steps away from the cabin, Michael turned to Carlo. "What are you doing here so early? You might not worry about your reputation, but you should think of Sarah's position in the community."

"I think Sarah's capable of taking care of her position without your chivalrous intervention." Carlo's voice was hard with suppressed anger.

"It's more than chivalrous intervention, Ghiberti. Sarah's naive in many ways. I don't like your placing her in situations that are compromising. She's an innocent, which is more than I can say for you. From now on, stay away from her."

"Look, Williams," Carlo said, "we're all entitled to our own opinions. You don't like me. I'm not sure how I feel about you. And we both care about Sarah. Doesn't Sarah have anything to say about the company she keeps?"

"She's too kind-hearted, too trusting of people. I admire her work with the Chinese and the prostitutes, but you're a horse of a different color. A lady of her caliber can't handle your type."

"My type?" Carlo asked, his curiosity aroused more than his anger.

Michael looked embarrassed by Carlo's question. "Ghiberti is Italian, isn't it?"

Carlo nodded agreeably, already knowing where the doctor was leading. "Well?" he pushed when Michael remained silent.

"We all know what that means," Michael answered finally.

"We do?"

"Damn it, man. Do I have to spell it out for you? You people are all hot-blooded, nothing but sex and women on your mind. Well, not with Sarah Comstock, you don't."

Carlo coughed discreetly and hid a smile behind his hand. "Yes, we Italians tend to be emotional. Talking with our hands, jibbering a lot of nonsense, always eating garlic and dancing the tarantella, that's us."

Carlo's smile rapidly faded and was replaced with a deadly seriousness. "I've encountered rough treatment because my name is Ghiberti, and I've never thought of changing that name because of it. Instead, I'd rather change people's minds about Italians. Now doesn't seem to be the time to get into the speech about the contributions Italians have made to the world since we're talking about Sarah Comstock, not Italians."

Michael stared at Carlo, his surprise barely masked. "I find you strange, Ghiberti. Really strange."

"And I find you ignorant, despite all your degrees. You're ignorant of Italians and a woman named Sarah Comstock. I've said as much as I plan to say about the former. As for the latter, Sarah can speak her own mind."

The quiet assurance in Carlo's manner unnerved Michael more than anything spoken. "You seem to feel you know her well, and I don't like that," he challenged stubbornly.

"I'm not sure I understand her but I do know enough not to make decisions for her," Carlo replied patiently. "I've said all this before. If you don't mind, I'll leave you here. Have a pleasant day."

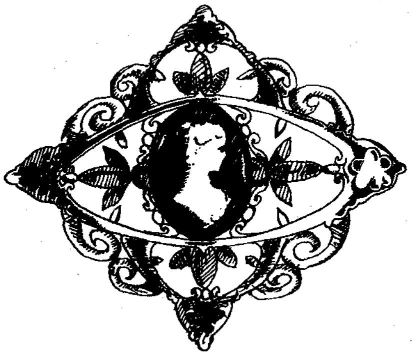
Carlo began to retrace his steps to the cabin but stopped when Michael grabbed his arm.

"You didn't hear me," he insisted. "I said for you to leave her alone. I meant it. You're coming back to town with me."

Carlo, nearing the end of his patience, continued walking. "If I want to see Sarah for the morning, for the day or for the whole damn night, I will, if she'll let me."

"Why you rotten, dirty, little bastard," Michael hissed. "If you so much as lay a finger on her, I'll—"

With those words, Carlo's resolve snapped, unleashing a primitive force he thought he had overcome. He grabbed Michael's left arm and swung it behind his back, simultaneously kicking Michael's feet out from under him. Pinning him to the ground, face downward, Carlo grabbed Michael's free arm with a viselike grip and placed it behind his back with the other one.



"Listen to me, Doctor," Carlo panted, out of breath with the exertion, "I don't want to hurt you, so just hold still and listen closely. There's no need to cast aspersions on my ancestry or family. There's also no need to be so protective of Sarah."

Michael started to squirm and Carlo brought more pressure to bear on his left arm. Michael quieted down and Carlo continued. "You might find it hard to believe, but I love Sarah and I have no intention of hurting her, if I can help it. What's between Sarah and me is none of your business. Do you understand? None."

Carlo pushed himself off Michael's back quickly and put a large space between them. "I'm sorry I did that to you," Carlo apologizd. "But this really is between Sarah and me."

He moved closer to extend a hand to Michael and realized his mistake almost immediately. Michael grabbed his hand for leverage and Carlo felt his feet leave the ground. His body sailed through the air and he landed on his back. Lying in the dust, Carlo started laughing, first quietly and then more and more loudly. "Good Lord," he finally gasped. "My father always used to say pride cometh before the fall. Now I think I know what he meant."

Michael stared at Carlo in disbelief. He had just thrown him through the air and watched him land with a bone-crunching thud that should have knocked him out or angered him into insensibility. Instead, Carlo sat in the dirt making Biblical references and laughing.

"Don't look so shocked, Doc," Carlo said, trying to stand and assess the damage. He shook one leg, then the other, and wiped the dust from his clothes. "If it makes you feel better, we'll call that last one your round."

Slowly Michael's stony face broke into a reasonable facsimile of a smile. "And like I said, Ghiberti, you're strange. I don't know how to get through to you."

"Then don't bother."

"Okay. I won't."

The two men eyed each other carefully, not knowing what to say next. Michael kicked a stone with the point of his boot. "You really meant what you said about loving Sarah?"

Carlo nodded, reluctant to talk with another man this way.

"Will you ask her to marry you?"

Carlo stepped back, still not trusting Michael despite his apparent candor.

"I think so," Carlo replied after a long pause.

"I may have definite opinions and prejudices, but I'm gentleman enough to admit when I'm wrong. Sarah's probably not the type of woman men like me can go around defending."

Unexpectedly, he thrust his hand out. "Sorry, Ghiberti. Fighting, in this instance, was stupid."

Carlo eyed Michael's hand warily before shaking it. Michael climbed into the buggy without another word. Carlo watched him until he was out of sight and then hurried back to the cabin.

When he entered the cabin, Sarah's coolness toward him was almost tangible.

"Do you want to talk?" he asked gently.

Sarah struggled to answer him lovingly, to let him touch her and help her out of the dark place to which she had plummeted on hearing of Jack's death.

"No, Carlo," she said slowly. "Just leave me alone. Go away."

Carlo kissed her forehead and closed the door softly behind him when he left, knowing he couldn't push or cajole her through her mourning. She needed to come to terms with death by herself, for he understood she was mourning far more than Jack's death itself.

Reluctantly, he walked to Central City and Nathaniel Hill's smelter, uncertain how to face and slay his own demons, so different from Sarah's but equally fearsome.

Sarah had ignored Carlo in the days following Jack's death and regretted it almost immediately. When she did go to talk with him, ready to share difficult feelings and let him see her uncertain and afraid, Carlo was no longer around. She frantically left messages for him at the Teller House and the smelter but they went unanswered. Finally, she had searched for him at the smelter and hotel but could never manage to find him.

Sarah was angry with herself for the way she allowed death to plunge her into a space removed from everyone else. She hadn't turned to Carlo, at first, and now fear gripped her insides. Maybe she had succeeded in driving him away when she most needed to be close to him.

She willed her thoughts to have the power to make Carlo appear and when she heard knocking on the door, she tried to push down the wild hope surging through her.

"Please come in," she said shyly to Carlo when she answered the door. She wanted to give him a long, reassuring kiss but something in his expression stopped her. Instead, she touched his hand, a mute appeal in her eyes.

The Claxtons and the Rumsticks had been visiting Sarah and they greeted Carlo with an uncomfortable overheartiness to cover up the tension that had come with his arrival. Nina, seeing Carlo's distraught expression, forgot about pretense. "You're upset, Carlo," she greeted him bluntly.

"And transparent about it, too," he said with a grimace.

"Out with it," demanded Albert. "You've been avoiding everyone since your return. I, for one, don't plan to sit here making small talk, acting as if all's well."

Carlo tugged on his beard. "Nathaniel Hill and I had our first major argument, that's all."

Donald whistled. "That's all. Why, no one argues with Hill. And if anyone was foolish enough to try, they wouldn't be working for him much—" Donald stopped talking and five heads swiveled in Carlo's direction.

"That's right," Carlo acknowledged, "I no longer have a job. It's funny. I wanted to leave years ago but never had the courage or could find a good reason. I was paid well; the work had its merits. I've always respected and admired Hill. I've just spent the last two days talking him out of my job and now I feel miserable."

Sarah touched his hand. "I'm sorry. But don't let this make you lose sight of what you found this summer."

"You never really talked about this summer," Marianne commented. "Not that you've had much chance, what with Jack's death and Albert's buying the *Clarion*."

"What's this about the *Clarion*?"

"Simple. While you were getting rid of your job, I was getting myself a new one. We'll be calling it by a different name and moving it to Georgetown, lock, stock and barrel. Sarah and the Rumsticks are moving, too." Albert laughed when he saw the information register on Carlo's face. "Now that you're jobless, why not join us? We could really use your help."

"Thanks, Albert, but no," Carlo replied without hesitation. "I know little about newspaper work and care to know even less. I'm not cut out for that kind of work."

"Thought you'd say that," Albert jumped with equanimity. "Just as I knew Donald would jump at the chance to set up his own business in wealthy Georgetown. Seems like Hill lost two good men this week."

Love's Dream

by Shirley Rodis

Though time has spilled
And I have learned that love
Is lust and tears and sacrifice,
There remains a corner of my heart
Where love lives in a dream.

Carlo kept glancing over at Sarah during this exchange, but her face revealed nothing. She hadn't thought Albert would offer Carlo a job but had guessed correctly that Carlo would refuse. She could sense the difficult time Carlo had cutting himself free from Hill and security. She struggled to join in the conversation and listen politely as Carlo began to share some of his adventures on the Hayden expedition.

Albert Claxton was relieved when Carlo lingered behind when the others made ready to leave. He heard Carlo's offer to help Sarah straighten the front room and gave Nina a knowing glance.

"Those two need to straighten out more than furniture," he quipped, guiding his wife away from Sarah's cabin.

"They certainly do," Nina said. "It just scares them. They're mighty independent people."

"Right," Albert agreed with a little smile. "I knew our Sarah had met her match the moment I set eyes on him. Didn't I tell you that, right then and there?"

"Of course, dear." Nina kissed his cheek lightly. "I should never have doubted it."

But inside Sarah's cabin, neither lightheartedness nor compatibility were present. She and Carlo stacked and carried the dishes and cups into the kitchen and rearranged chairs and pillows in strained silence until Carlo could stand it no longer. He grasped Sarah's shoulders and made her face him directly.

"What's wrong, Sarah? I know by now when you're very angry with me."

"No, I'm not," she lied. "It's just that we haven't had a chance to be together since Jack's funeral."

Carlo leaned wearily against the counter. "I'm too tired to play games, Sarah. What's wrong?"

Sarah slowly came alive, her eyes

showing fire again. “I'm upset about the fact that you've cut me out of your life without even talking with me about it.”

“What?” Carlo looked perplexed.

“You heard me.”

“I heard you and you're not making sense. *You're* the one going to Georgetown, remember? Did you discuss that with me? No, all you did was tell me to leave the morning after we had been so very close. You declared your love for me and then kicked me out.”

He slammed the dish he was holding onto the counter. “How can you be mad with me when you act like that?”

“And you're leaving Hill,” she yelled at him. “No, don't tell me. Let me guess. You're leaving on another expedition, this one halfway around the world, and you won't be returning for sixteen months. It's your subtle way of telling me there's no future for us. I understood the moment you said you left your job. I heard your farewell loud and clear. What are you standing here for? Good-bye.”

Carlo's face broke into that boyish grin Sarah loved. “Nathaniel Hill taught me two very important words: Assume nothing. There's no expedition. I'm not leaving you, unless you want me to.”

Carlo drew her into his arms, the dishes and cleaning forgotten. They drew strength and hope from that embrace and words, long pent-up, came tumbling out in quick progression. Jack's death and Anna's departure; Sarah's depression and Donald's excitement over a new business; Hill's disgust with Carlo's changing values and Albert's revitalization through the *Clarion*. There was suddenly so much to say to one another.

“What is it now?” Sarah prodded teasingly when Carlo gave her a secretive smile.

“I've been gnawing around the edges of this problem for the two weeks we've been apart.” Carlo looked excited. “I almost gave up and now I see the solution's been right in front of me the whole time. Of course, we can get married. It's so simple yet I couldn't see it.”

“Here we go again.” Sarah rolled her eyes upward and began counting slowly. “One, two, three . . .”

“Stop that, Sarah. This is important.”

“I can see that. Four, five, six, seven . . .”

“It has to do with the definition of

CAMEO LOVE SIGNS

by Phoebe Matthews

SCORPIO OCT. 24-NOV. 21

The November sun shines through your sign, lending its warmth to your impetuous, affectionate Scorpio nature, helping you to express your innermost desires, while the full moon weaves its silver web of love around an old affair of the heart. If there has been some conflict fanning a tear-filled memory into flames, loving Venus softens a confrontation this month, allowing you to think more clearly. A more promising direction in your life opens after the 12th, perhaps involving a desired change in fortune. Add the flickering gold of autumn sunlight to your costume now, to complement your lively Scorpio glow. *Romantic days: 7, 17, 22.*

SAGITTARIUS NOV. 22-DEC. 21

If temperamental Mars revives regret, distressing your kind Sagittarius heart this month, avoid those pitfalls that cause you anxiety and turn instead to a faithful friend who will brush away your fears and guide you toward a safer, pleasanter path. Much that disturbs you now will fade away after the 21st, opening your heart to a beguiling memory of the past that could enliven your tomorrows, as renewed joys beckon your adventurous spirit. While seductive Venus glimmers like candlelight, drawing friends to your side, wear a touch of fiery red to reflect the warm radiance of your Sagittarius charms. *Romantic days: 5, 10, 19.*

CAPRICORN DEC. 22-JAN. 20

An ardent excitement from the moon shines through the romantic side of your life, kindling passions that your cool, charming Capricorn personality usually pretends do not exist. Perhaps your heart overflows with emotion now. You must find some quiet moments to renew your spirit, especially after the 23rd when arrogant Mars draws you into a tangle that could lead to discord you would prefer to avoid. A darling friend who is clever with words can smooth and guide your troubled thoughts. Wear the rosy glow of reflected firelight and let a November spell of Venus luck clear away the smoky confusion that has lingered to obscure a dream. *Romantic days: 7, 12, 21.*

AQUARIUS JAN. 21-FEB. 19

The reassuring presence of a faithful, romantic companion continues to fill your life with pleasure, even though angry Mars creates a conflict with a friend that disturbs your peace-loving Aquarius heart. Rather than allow this momentary setback to distress you further, let kindly Venus guide you through careful consideration of your hopes for the future. Trust your intuition, waiting until after the 15th to make any firm decisions. By month's end, the fire of anger may well have cooled. As autumn fades, draw new joy from the coming season, complementing your beauty with soft shades of winter white. *Romantic days: 1, 23, 27.*

PISCES FEB. 20-MARCH 20

While the star-crossed powers of Saturn and Jupiter obscure the truth about some legacy or unsuspected fortune, calm your worried thoughts and avoid entanglements with an arrogant gentleman. Generous Venus should illuminate your troubles to dispel the smokescreen of confusion, so that after the 17th you will see your choices more clearly and reach your decisions. Although you may receive a loving message that could soothe your spirit, be wary of some secret from the past. The russet browns of autumn are not always your favorite shades, but this month November's colors enhance the inner glow of your delicate Pisces beauty. *Romantic days: 1, 20, 28.*

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Love drifts around you like the hazy blue of autumn bonfires, a shade that flatters you now, though you need no addition to your vibrant Aries beauty this month. With passionate Venus kindling amorous sparks in the heart of your dearest love, and the moon's promising romance, your only problem in November will be to find time to untangle all your other involvements. No wonder, then, that a few friendships fade into the shadows and some misunderstanding arises surrounding a journey or a source of fortune. But never mind, lucky Aries; after the 19th the moon's glow will clear away some of the confusion. *Romantic days: 1, 20, 28.*

marriage. I've been thinking of it in terms of the Claxtons and the Rumsticks and my mother and father. But who says it has to be that way?"

Elated, Carlo planted a quick kiss on Sarah's forehead.

"... Nine, ten. That does it. What are you talking about?"

"Marrying you. Haven't you been listening?" Suddenly Carlo stopped himself and looked down at his feet contritely. "Sorry, Sarah. I guess it's only right that I ask you first. Will you marry me? Okay, now what hit me so suddenly was—"

"You didn't wait for my answer," interrupted Sarah.

"No, I didn't. You'll answer in the negative unless I have a chance to add something about the state of our marriage. You see, we will marry and everything will be legal and proper in the eyes of the world, only we'll make up our own rules."

Sarah groaned. "Yes?"

"Rules agreeing that we can go off separately and do what we need to do. We'll be monogamous, although I don't see that as a problem and—"

"I hate to keep interrupting, but why bother being married?"

"Because I don't want anyone to snicker at us or call our love cheap or dirty. You can thank Michael Williams for making me think along those lines."

"Remind me to do that someday." Sarah tried to hide her smile. "I'm surprised you care what other people think."

"When it concerns you, I do. Marrying means one thing to the world. For us, it can mean something different, a way to be together without holding on so tightly we can't live fully. We'll have to compromise and some people will look at us askance for some of our activities. If it's clear between us, then that's all that matters."

"Marriage never appealed to me, but then I've never heard it described this way." Sarah shrugged her shoulders casually but her smile, when she faced Carlo, was joyous. "At least, life will never be dull and boring."

Carlo laughed mischievously. "Sarah Comstock and Carlo Ghiberti getting married. Who would ever believe it?"

Sarah kissed him full on the lips. "Not me," she declared most emphatically. "Certainly not me."

NOVEMBER 1980

TAURUS

APRIL 20-MAY 20

The full moon shines through your sign this November, adding its light to your sparkling Taurus personality, while its silver glitter enhances your autumn beauty. Although a long-lasting romance has had its turnabout these months, now you must make your choice, one that may well return you to an earlier stage in this interlude, so listen carefully to the wisdom of your own heart before confronting your beloved with any ultimatums. Jealous Mars could open an argument about someone else's wealth that is best avoided. After the 22nd you could discover that an old conflict has been resolved, bringing you contentment. *Romantic days: 7, 17, 21.*

GEMINI

MAY 21-JUNE 21

Love continues to confuse and delight you, unsettling your thoughtful Gemini nature, while passionate Venus encourages a passing fancy and angry Mars almost extinguishes an old relationship. This is not the time to place your faith in inner voices or beguiling daydreams. It will take all your Gemini wit to resolve your affairs, but a sister or dear companion who has been your confidante in the past may now guide you through the fog to your heart's goal, if you handle lovingly a situation that occurs around the 5th. Calm your heart with the soothing blues of November skies, caring for yourself now and avoiding those who would overtire you. *Romantic days: 6, 19, 23.*

CANCER

JUNE 22-JULY 22

Although fickle Uranus has managed to keep your love life vibrant one moment and fading the next, November involves your troubled heart more deeply, forcing decisions and bringing some change in the direction your romance has been following. Late in November, beware of the temptations of a moon-inspired wanderlust. If you will keep your passionate Cancer spirit close to hearth and home, you can sidestep unpleasant confrontations with a long-cherished companion. Your inner spirit will glow anew after the 25th, matching your growing fortune. Throughout autumn's farewell month, the flickering orange shades of candlelight reflect your affectionate nature. *Romantic days: 8, 22, 26.*

LEO

JULY 23-AUG. 22

With the moon's lucky node still glimmering in your sight, the red-orange tones of autumn bonfires work marvelously as backgrounds for your elegant Leo beauty. If a haze of confusion has obscured matters regarding a message or a sentimental journey, November breezes bring the horizon into focus. Less genial is the influence of passionate Mars as it brings out the thunder in an arrogant gentleman, requiring you to ponder now the true desires of your heart. Perhaps this is not the best time to pursue commitments from others, but after the 27th your inner strength will rise anew like a phoenix to guide your way. *Romantic days: 1, 6, 28.*

VIRGO

AUG. 23-SEPT. 22

Venus luck lights the lamp that reveals where your fortunes lie this month, while wandering Mercury inspires a message involving changes in some affair that is always near your heart. Be wary now, using all your thoughtful Virgo intuition to keep a perplexing problem in your homelife from spreading like an unwatched brush fire into the tranquility of your romance. Wipe away your tears with glimmering memories that reach out to comfort you from the past. Wrap your courage in yellow, reminiscent of the moon's glow, for on both the 2nd and the 29th the glamorous moon touches your sign with its magic to offer you delicious new beginnings. *Romantic days: 12, 17, 25.*

LIBRA

SEPT. 23-OCT. 23

Mysterious Venus flatters your haunting Libra beauty with romantic shades of lavender while she lingers in your sign this month, helping you overcome those emotional turmoils that leave you feeling as though you had been called from a cozy fireside and left shivering in a chill November wind. Although an affair that you had hoped might flame seems instead to have flickered and sunk back into ashes, look again toward a friend who could someday become a lover. Try not to dwell upon the past but, rather, after the 4th, find fortune in the changing pattern of your destiny, expecting nothing from others and relying instead on what your own talents gain for you. *Romantic days: 5, 10, 27*

On a snowy November morning, a less tranquil Carlo stood before the new brick building housing the governmental services for Central City. Despite Donald's reassurances and Albert's endless supply of jokes, Carlo could still feel a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach.

When Sarah emerged from the Teller House, flanked by a beaming Marianne and a tearful Nina, Carlo began to feel calmer. He barely noticed Sarah's new navy blue velvet dress with its matching cloak. He was too busy searching her face for a reassuring sign or warm gesture. Sarah gave him a tremulous smile before whispering in his ear. Carlo suddenly grimaced, grabbed Sarah's arm, and started marching her up the stairs of the city hall.

"Wait a minute, you two. I'm supposed to bring Sarah in there," Albert yelled, hurrying to catch up with them. "You get to take her out. That's the way it goes."

Carlo stopped abruptly, a sheepish grin on his face. "Right, Albert. I got carried away. You know, she had the nerve to dare me to back out while I still had the chance."

Sarah gave Carlo a harmless kick in the shins, walked decorously over to Albert and linked her arm through his.

The wedding ceremony itself was brief. On a suggestion from Sarah, adapted from her Quaker heritage, they had arranged to speak a few words to one another beyond the legal ones intoned by Judge Pelham. They first promised, in the time-honored words of the ceremony, to be loving and faithful to one another for life, although both chose to omit the word obey and the exchange of rings.

In a soft voice that became steadily firmer, Sarah added, "I wish to be your partner in spirit, to share in peace and prosperity, turmoil and trouble, with honesty, courage, and a good amount of humor."

Carlo smiled and took Sarah's hand tightly in his own. "Sarah, I don't know what lies beyond this moment. But we'll share whatever life brings, although we may be far apart at times and together at others, in body and in spirit."

Judge Pelham swallowed hard. "Couldn't have said it better myself," he added heartily after clearing his throat. "Good luck to you both."

Hands were shaken all around, the legal document signed by the Rumsticks with a flourish, and kisses and hugs exchanged. Nina gently wiped the tears from the corners of Albert's eyes before touching her own overflowing ones.

The parting with the Rumsticks and Claxtons a few minutes later proved to be even more difficult and was tinged with a bittersweet quality. Each person realized that life from this point on would encompass the unfamiliar.

Donald and Albert were searching for an office in Georgetown to jointly house the printing press and an accounting business, while Marianne and Nina tried to find suitable apartments to rent. Sarah had given her cabin in Glory Hole to Stuart Thomas to dispose of in the spring.

As for Sarah and Carlo, they had temporarily added most of their belongings to those of the Claxtons', for their own plans were far from definite. The only thing known for certain was they'd be living the lives of vagabonds throughout the winter, thanks to Carlo's ample savings. Carlo wrote Beata telling her of their marriage while Sarah chose not to notify her father. Her family in Rhode Island held nothing for her except sad memories.

So, on that November morning in 1874, Carlo and Sarah Ghiberti left Central City, ready to explore the Territory, guided by nothing more than tentative dreams and visions. Their future was uncertain, their mood pensive but determined as they began the business of learning more about themselves, each other, and the land.

NEXT MONTH IN CAMEO

TWO GREAT NOVELS

A contemporary English romance

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by Jean Saunders

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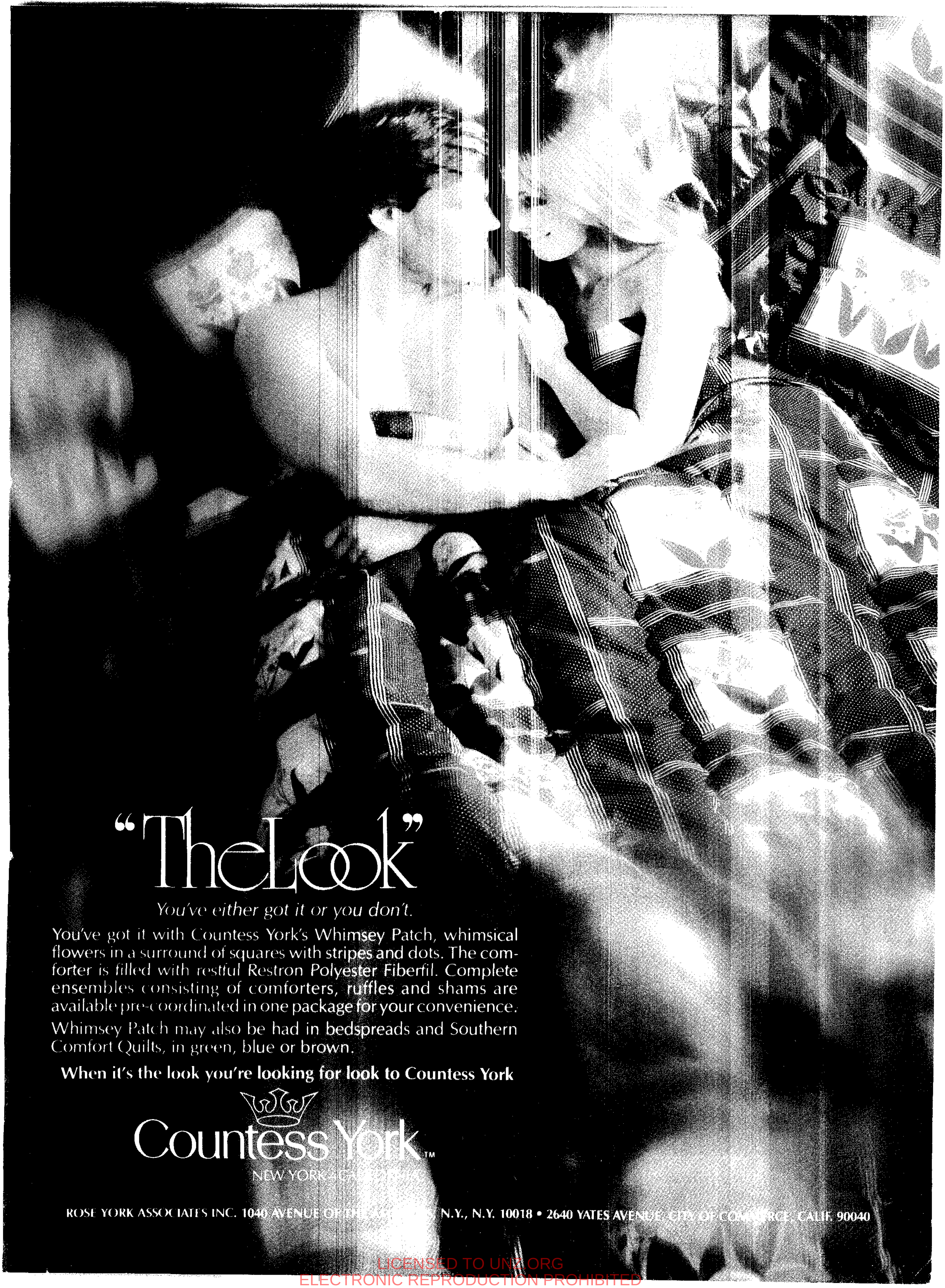"TheLook"

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